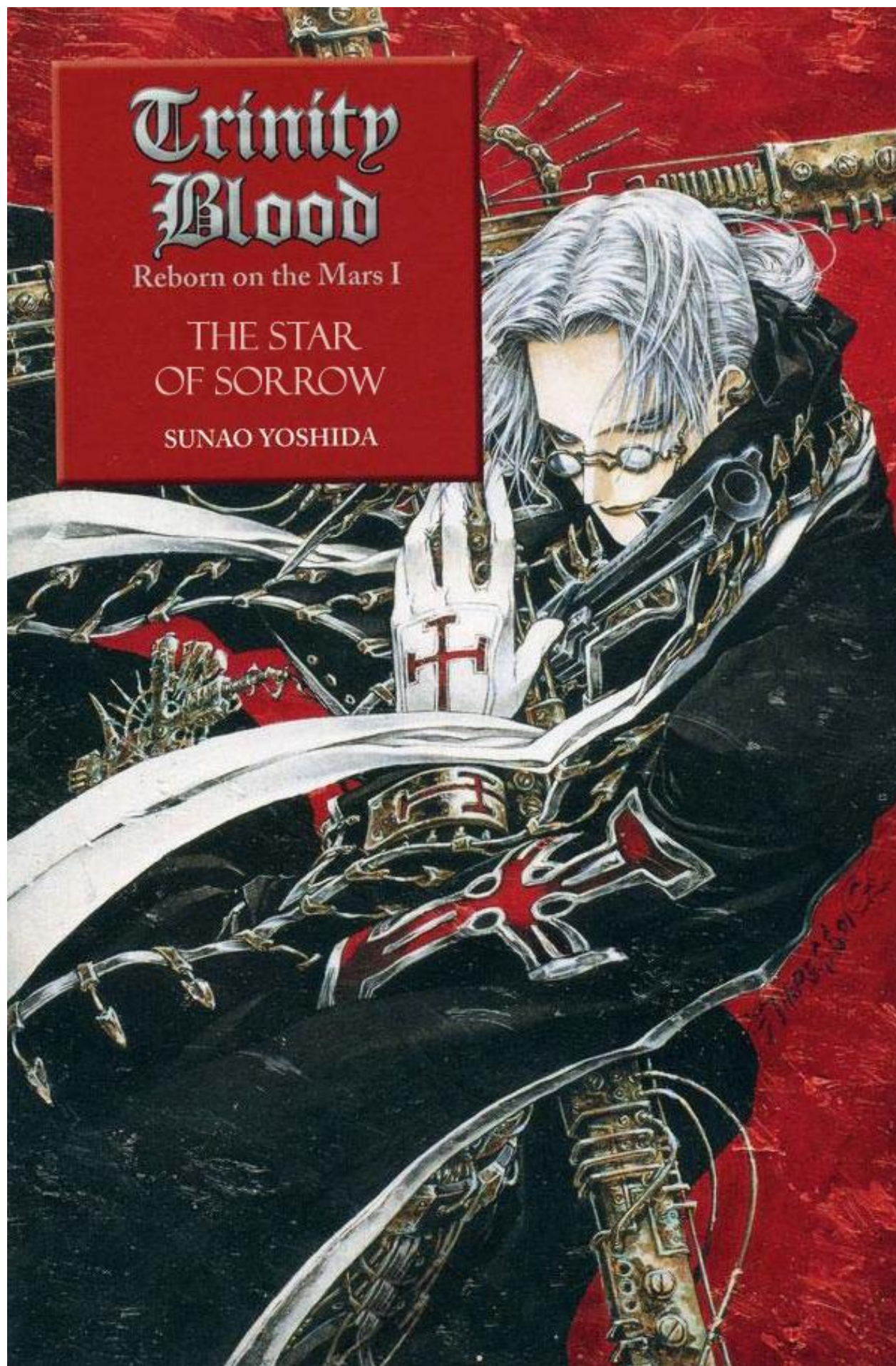


Trinity Blood

Reborn on the Mars I

THE STAR
OF SORROW

SUNAO YOSHIDA





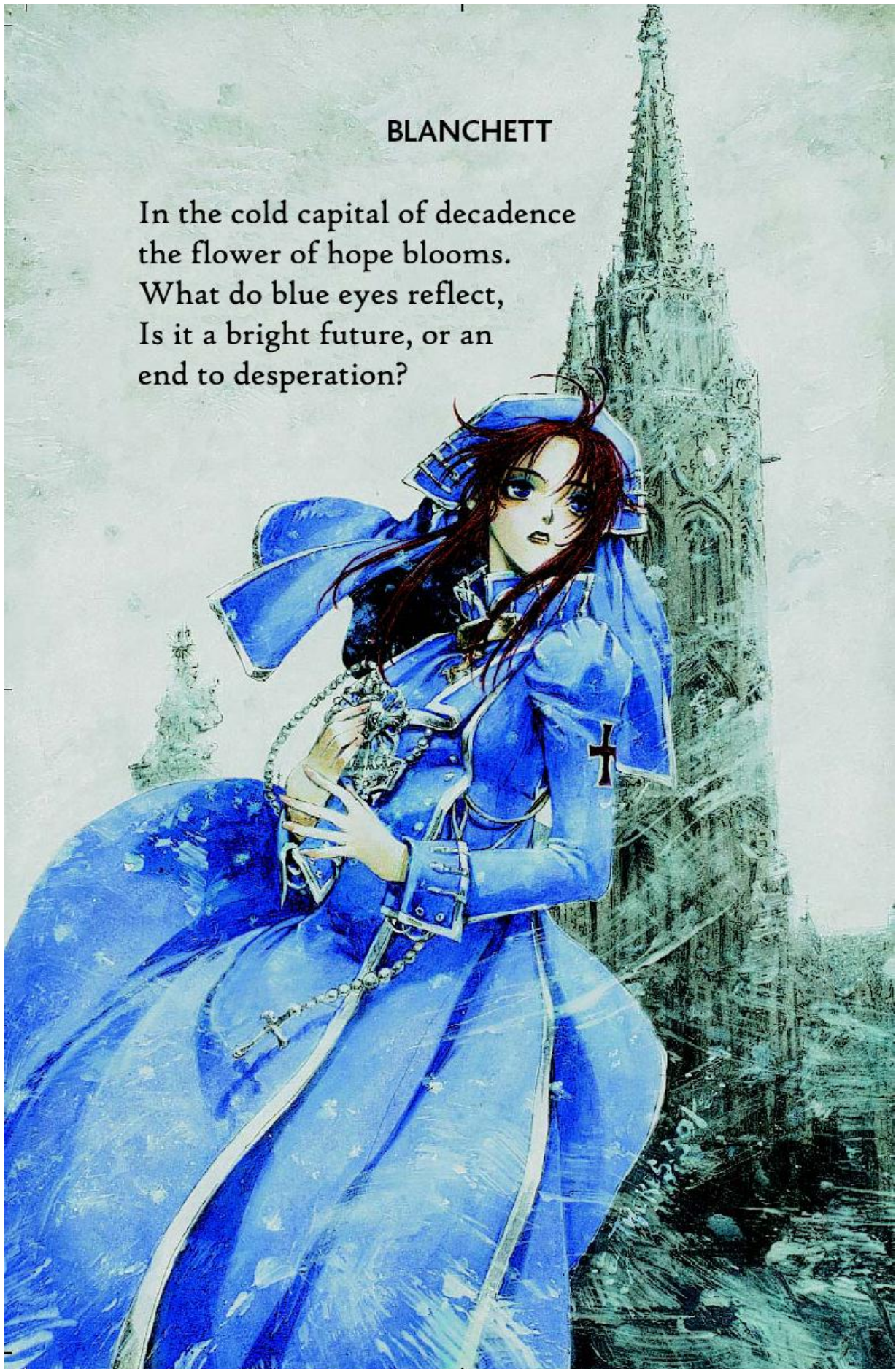
NIGHTROAD

Guilty, you carry the cross of redemption!
A fallen angel with black wings!
Take the sword that condemns you
and walk alone through the night....



BLANCHETT

In the cold capital of decadence
the flower of hope blooms.
What do blue eyes reflect,
Is it a bright future, or an
end to desperation?



TRINITY BLOOD

REBORN ON THE MARS 1

The Star of Sorrow

Sunao Yoshida

Index

Prologue: The Night of the Hunter	6
Chapter 1: The City of Blood	11
Chapter 2: The Dark Banquet	44
Chapter 3: The Betraying Knight	73
Chapter 4: The Star of Sorrow	98
Epilogue: The Evening of Hunters	143

Prologue

NIGHT OF THE HUNTER

Because I will ask for your blood; by the hands of animals I will ask for it, and from the hand of man; from the hand of the male, your brother I will ask for the life of man.

Genesis 9,5

From the moment she opened the heavy door, she could smell the heavy odor of blood.

Turning away from the stench coming from the other end of the chapel, Sasha held on tighter to the candlestick she carried. The sweat in her hands gave her an unpleasant sensation.

The candle's flickering light only made the darkness seem darker. The shadows seemed to silently follow her every move.

Ever since her baptism, Sasha had come to this place every day for the past fifteen years. Even so, never in all her life had she ever encountered such darkness like the one that now permeated the chapel.

—Holy Mother, give me protection. Protect me, Holy Mother.
Aside from her older brother, Sasha was the bravest person in the village.

When they appeared, the cowardly villagers had given up and locked themselves in their houses. Even the mayor, their father, had taken refuge in his mansion, surrounded by garlic wreaths and hawthorn. When they took her brother's fiancée, nobody wanted to help get her back.

Three days ago, Sasha had volunteered to go with him into the church they had taken over to use as headquarters, but he had refused. He told her that she must stay behind and protect their parents in his absence. That had been three days ago, he went on his own and...never came back.

—Lord, give me protection. Holy Mother, protect me.

Looking at the shadows, Sasha slowly made her way through the chapel. A cold hand, taken from her worst nightmares, grabbed her shoulder. Her eyes hurt from not blinking.

When she tried to wet her lips, which had gone dry, she heard the floor boards beside her creak.

—Wh... Who's there?

The giant female form that appeared in the candle's flickering light almost made Sasha fall over in surprise and fear. As the figure came towards her, she noticed that the woman had a child in her arms and that her kind smile was made of white marble.

Sasha sighed in relief.

—Oh my god! Don't scare me like that, Holy Mother.

She could still feel her heartbeats, but she managed to control her shaking knees and she wiped the cold sweat from her brow. After playfully scolding the Virgin's statue, who was the patron saint of the village, Sasha turned... and now she really felt like her heart stopped.

Two shadows were sitting in one of the benches.

—Miris, look, someone has come to visit us.

—Can it be a little lost bird, Maris?

It was two women who looked at each other, smiling.

Both were exactly the same, as if they were the same person. Both had beautiful features, white as alabaster, and long blonde hair that fell to their hips. Even though winter was approaching, they didn't wear any coats. They only wore some light silk dresses. The only thing that told them apart was the shade of their lipstick: One wore a light pink one and the other one a dark blue one.

Looking at her with their amber eyes, the pink lips whispered:

—What an unforgivable lack of manners, Miris. We have a guest and we don't even offer a cup of tea. Where did we leave that tea kettle?

The woman looked around in an exaggerated manner, laughing. Sasha shook her candlestick in front of her.

—Monsters! What did you do with my brother?

All three shadows danced mysteriously in the candle's flickering light. Even though she was scared, the girl yelled at the top of her lungs:

—I am Sasha, the daughter of Kasperek, Mayor of Konavli village. I've come here to get revenge for my brother. Get ready to fight!

—Your brother? Hey, Maris, You think she might be referring to the cute boy that came by the other day?

The seductive blue lips answered:

—You remember? That little boy that came to read us The Bible...

—I... I have a bible too! And a crucifix! —exclaimed Sasha.

She showed them the Holy Scriptures that she held on her left hand and the rosary that hanged from her neck. Even as she showed them, her knees trembled in fear. She was afraid. She was so afraid that she thought her heart might stop.

Sasha did not trust the figures in front of her. Those two beautiful women were one of them: humanity's natural enemy. They had appeared right after the Armageddon. They were called "shadow dwellers", "night dwellers" and a lot of other things that described them. But the most common way to refer to them was...

—Vampires! Prepare to die!

—Your brother was delicious, little birdie...

A sweet voice gently caressed her ears. Once she noticed the hands that held her from behind, Sasha's face turned white as snow. The figures that once sat on the bench were gone, and as if by magic they now stood behind the brave girl

—No matter how hard you try to read us The Bible...

—And threatened us with that crucifix...

—And beg for your life...

—You will be our supper...

Sasha could not respond to the alternating voices. She felt a cold shiver run down her spine, and her cold, stiff fingers let go of the candlestick.

—This little birdie was a lot smarter than her brother, Miris. She came well prepared.

—That's true, Maris. This damned silver... that is the most hated thing for us Methuselah after UV rays.

With an annoyed look on her face, the woman with the blue lips kicked the candlestick and send it flying to a corner of the chapel. The candle extinguished and everything went dark.

—Don't be afraid little birdie. You'll soon be with that brother of yours you miss so much.

Between the pink lips two long fangs showed and a low seductive voice emanated from them.

—Let see; what would this little birdie taste like...

By the dim moonlight streaming through the window, the blue lips came upon the girl's neck. A pair of fangs slowly sank into the young soft flesh.

At that very moment, a flash of light broke through the darkness.

--?!

The blue-lipped vampire fell backwards, letting out an otherworldly scream. Somebody had stabbed her with a rosary on her hand. It was a simple rosary. It didn't seem like it had been thrown with particular strength or that it was sharp, but the cross on the rosary went completely through the hand.

—Mi... Miris!

While she hugged her sister who screamed in pain, Maris, the pink-lipped vampire, turned to face their unknown assailant. Her unwavering eyes glared, full of hatred.

—Who goes there? Are there still people in his town stupid enough to bother us while we eat?

Through the skylight the night's dark blue sky was seen. To the south, two moons watched over the Earth; The First Moon, which was perfectly round and the Second Moon that was shapeless and red as blood. Suddenly, a tall figure cut through the moonlight.

—Sorry to say I am not a villager, said the figure calmly. Maris and Miris Zadrovshka, In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit you are under arrest on suspicion of 22 counts of murder and vampirism.

—¡Damn it! That robe...

Miris bared her fangs at the figure that shone in the moonlight. He was a tall man, covered in a black habit and a cape of the same color and on his chest a golden rosary shone.

—The Vatican!

—Please forgive my rudeness. I was send by the Vatican's Department of Papal Affairs...—The man spoke in such a friendly manner that it seemed out of place, but a wet sound of an object impacting flesh cut his presentation short.

The rosary that had been in the blue-lipped vampire was now deeply embedded in the man's flesh. Miris had gone behind him without his notice as she spat in a cold fury:

—How dare a mere Terran like you injure me? You'll pay for this transgression with your life, dog!

Moving her delicate hands in an elegant manner, she buried the rosary deep in the priest's chest with strength greater than any wild beasts until the tearing sounds of the heart could be heard and the man fell on his knees. Miris smiled, satisfied, at the beautiful sight of the red blood dropping under the moons' pale light...

—That was easy... I don't care if they are priests, or villagers like this girl, all the Vatican dogs end up dead, right, Maris?

—Yeah, yeah whatever you say, Miris, but, can you please not make any more mess? Be a good sister and clean up all that blood.

Drunk on blood and her need for revenge, Maris, without thought, left her sister to handle things and looked down at the girl in her arms. The brave little bird had fainted at the sight she had seen.

—Well then, I shall begin with this birdie.

Maris laughed, moving the hair that fell on her white face away from her. For a Terran, the girl was very pretty, and her blood smelled good too.

From the other side of the door she could hear the sound of fangs piercing the skin and sound of the blood flowing through her sister's throat. The hunt must have been delicious, for she could even hear faint moans coming from the other side.

—Miris, leave some for me —Maris told her sister, moving the hair from the girl's throat.—. I left you half of that birdie, so let's split her in half, ok?

—I fear that is going to be impossible. A calm voice that was not her sister's answered.

—It's because I am somewhat picky with my food and I don't like the blood of little girls like her.

—?!

The first thing Maris saw the moment she turned was her sister's eyes bulging out in fear as if she were a Terran. From her blue lips that seemed to be frozen in mid-scream, only a faint breath could be seen and her face was as white as snow, but that wasn't what surprised her the most. Behind her sister stood a tall figure that lingered over her sister's throat.

—¡M... Monster! What the hell are you?

From the lips that were on Miris's throat a reddish liquid emanated. Maris was used to that sight, but the blood the figure was drinking was...

—Idiot! That blood! Our blood!

—Have you never thought of it?

The figure smiled sadly, leaving Miris's weakened body by the blood loss and fear, on the floor. Two sharp fangs appeared on the figure's lips.

—Cows and chickens are human food.

Human blood is a vampire's food, and I...

—So the rumors I've heard are true then...The Vatican, our worst enemy, created incredible monsters. Monsters that feed on our blood.

Coming closer to the vampire, whose fangs trembled in fear, the figure said with a melancholy:

—I am... a vampire that drinks the blood of other vampires.

Chapter 1

THE CITY OF BLOOD

Oh the cities of blood, full of lies and pillage,
without the plunder being far behind!

Nahum 3,1

I

The red light of the twilight shone through the glass ceiling.

The air was tinged red and it was cold and apprehensive like a witch's kiss. Abel Nightroad exhaled a white smoke as he disembarked the train which still emanated some steam

—Whoa! What a sad-looking place!

After adjusting his round glasses that were as thick as a bottle's bottom, he passed a look around the deserted platform with his winter-lake eyes.

It seemed like nobody dared breathe in the station that was as big as a palace and covered in glass like a greenhouse. The employees lingering about could be counted with the fingers of one hand, and the scarce passengers moved lethargically about, a look of boredom on their faces as they carried around their heavy luggage. If one stared at the floor's tiling, there were some very obvious cracks on them, and the glass on the ceiling was broken in various places.

—¡How bleak! I guess I can't just hop back on the train and head back to Rome, now, huh?

—¡Hey you, the tall one!

A hot-tempered face appeared in front of the young man, who had remained static in front of the aisle talking to himself. It was the stoker, who from the steam engine shouted angrily:

—How long are you going to stand there like an idiot? If you are going somewhere, get moving! This is a dangerous place!

—Ah, sorry! But, may I ask you a question? Are you sure this is the last stop?

—Of course it is! Isn't it written there?

With a nod, the stoker pointed to a sign that hanged over their heads and he read in a harsh voice the words written there in both Hungarian and in Rome's official language.

—This is Istavan: Central station of the free city of Istavan.

—So it's true... I had hoped there had been a mistake —Abel whined, passing his hand through his disheveled silver hair.



—I was thinking that because the city's nickname is "The Pearl of the Danube" that it would be a more lively place. This is little more than a country train station...

—Whatever, just leave already! This is the turning point and I need to take this train back to Vienna in a hurry.

—Eh? You're leaving already?

But they had just arrived. Adjusting his glasses, tinted by the white smoke, Abel continued talking.

—Conductor sir, can you do me the favor of waiting for a while longer? It's because I'm debating whether or not to return to Rome and lose my job...

—Idiot! Can't you see that night is falling?! You think I'm going to stay here longer than what is absolutely necessary?

—Eh? What do you mean by tha...? Hey!

Abel jumped surprised. The locomotive made a whistling sound at the same time that steam came out of it. Right in front of the young man, who walked away from the train dragging his coat, the train's wheels started moving.

—Be a little more careful will you. That was dangerous! Do you want to steam me, or what?

—Good bye, kiddo! If you care anything about your life, hurry up and find a place to stay. If not...

What could he have meant with "if not"? The noise made by the steam engine drowned the harsh voice of the man and his last words never reached Abel's ears. The train crossed the threshold and disappeared into the horizon under the blue-ish hue that had begun to fall on the city.

—¡Cough, cough! And to make matter worse, he got my best clothes dirty! ¡What a disaster! —Abel whined, while he saw the train's lights become small and disappear.

Abel took his luggage once more and started walking, resigned, while he dusted his coat. The air was turning blue too. If he could make it to his shelter before it was completely dark... Since he had picked up his speed, he could not avoid the collision with the figure that had popped out from behind a column.

—Wah!

At the moment Abel screamed, the figure dropped a paper bag it had been carrying and whatever was in the bag broke.

—So... Sorry!

Shaking, Abel shouted at the figure with whom he had crashed.

—Please forgive me, I was distracted... Are you ok?

The man remained on the floor in the same position he had fallen, rubbing his kidneys.

The jacket and wool pants he wore were somber, but looked warm. Since he was wearing a scarf and a hat that covered most of his face, his features were hard to define, but he seemed like a small man. At most, he'd reach up to Abel's chest.

—Sorry, sorry... Did you hurt yourself?

—No! Don't touch me!

A skinny arm, like one belonging to a teenager, pushed Abel's hand away. Rubbing his butt, the young man jumped up with agility.

—Please forgive me. By the way, when the bag fell, it made a strange noise. Is everything ok?

—Huh?

Before he could even take off his hat, Abel had already picked up the bag. Whatever it was that was in the bag, it was heavy. And to make matters worse, the bottom of the bag was completely wet.

—Was it oil or something? It seems like a bottle broke.

When he opened the bag, he could smell a strong odor that irritated his eyes. Inside were 2 large wine bottles. One was filled with a transparent liquid and the other one held a dark colored liquid. The one carrying the transparent liquid had a huge crack and the liquid leaking out of it had completely soaked a pocket watch that had been lodged in one of the bag's corners.

It seems like the watch is broken! The insides have fallen out. I ask for your forgiveness. I will make sure to compensate you.

—Ah! It was nothing. The watch was already broken.

The boy in the hat said through gritted teeth in a much lower voice than before. His feet shuffled slightly as if trying to get away from Abel.

—I don't need any compensation. It was... but can you be so kind as to give me back my bag?

—Huh? No, that's impossible; I have to make things right —said Abel, somewhat confused, as he took out his wallet—. How much will it be? Will 200 dinars be enough? This is all I have. Let's see: one, two, three... Whoa, whoa! I only have eight dinars.

His voice trembled as he looked through his wallet. With great force he grabbed the boy in the hat, who was slowly sneaking away from him.

—I'm sorry I don't have that much money on me. Do you think you can wait for me a couple a days? I promise I will pay you back.

—No... Yes that's fine. Don't worry about it...

—Now we're talking! Can you give me your name and address?

—My addre...? Oh well, it's ok. Just forget this ever happened, please. It wasn't that valuable anyway.

—Don't tell me that! Oh! Allow me to present myself. I am Abel Nightroad. I come from Rome; it's a pleasure to meet you.

The boy was clearly nervous; he loosened his hands at Abel's excessive familiarity. His blue eyes like lapis lazuli moved from side to side as if they were looking for a way out, but they froze as they looked towards the entrance to the hangar.

A group of ten uniformed men had just crossed the control point. They were all good-looking men, dressed in dark blue coats and hats. It was obvious by the guns they carried around their waists that they were not employees of the station.

—I guess Istavan is a very quiet place, right? This is the first time I have the pleasure of visiting, but this misery and this silence... The truth is...

—Look I'm kinda busy right now... I mean... I'm in a hurry.

The group of uniformed men was headed straight towards them. Apparently Abel was unaware of the group of men approaching since he kept on talking, until the boy interrupted him.

—Sorry, but I need to get going. If you would be so kind as to move...

—Really? Well, tell me your name and address and I'll go see you tomorrow without fail.

—I told you to forget about it.

—Hey, you two!

A deep voice and a strong nicotine odor interrupted them.

—What are you doing here?

A man as big as a bear stared at them with bleary eyes.

He was huge. He was easily a head taller than Abel, and by his sheer size it didn't even seem that they were of the same species. Was he a soldier? From his waist, a gun hung ostensibly and on his hat he had a double cross, Istavan's emblem.

—And you are?

—Gergey Radcon, Colonel of the Istavan Guard.

The man presented himself with a cold glint in his eyes, while he took his hands to his holster as if to intimidate them. His hands were large and thick. He didn't seem like the type to have many friends, meaning that the men behind him were more likely his subordinates.

—I'm the one asking the questions here. Don't you know that it is prohibited to be in the station after 6 pm? What exactly are you doing here?

—Well, you see, the thing is that I accidentally broke whatever this young man was carrying and I was trying to repay him. Please forgive this scene.

—?

Radcon was staring at them like a hungry piranha, but it seemed that Abel's apologies had dissipated some of his suspicions. He sneered and seemed to have lost all interest in them.

—Ok, leave.

We can leave? Thank you so much and sorry for the disturbance. Have a good... Hey!

As he was leaving and bowing, Abel felt somebody trip him and he landed hard on the floor screaming in pain.

—Hey, be a little careful please, that you are going to ruin the tiles!

Radcon moved his foot, laughing evilly. The soldiers that were with him laughed in flattery of their boss.

—Oh, what a shame!

Rubbing his bruised nose, Abel finally lifted his head. There was blood dripping from between his fingers.

—Are you ok? —asked the boy in the hat as he came forward to offer a handkerchief.—. Here, can you get up?

—Oh, thank you!

Gratefully taking the handkerchief from the boy, Abel stood up shakily. The boy in the hat helped him steady himself.

—Don't force yourself more than you have to. Walk slowly.

—I'm so sorry. I am kind of clumsy...

—Hey, tall guy!

The rough voice rang from behind Abel, who walked unsteadily, supporting himself on the boy with the hat. As he turned, he saw the beast give them a look full of contempt.

—Be careful not to fall.

Laughing like a hyena, Radcon turned and saluted his soldiers who were still laughing. Telling each other dirty jokes, they kept strutting through the platform.

—Damn bastards...

Even though he whispered the insult, it was still heard over the laughter of the soldiers. The soldiers immediately stopped laughing and stared at their leader.

—Wait a minute, what did you say?

He growled as he grabbed the boy in the hat with a speed not becoming of his size.

—Were you referring to us when you said “damn bastards”?

The boy in the hat remained silent; he only motioned his shoulder and tried to move the hand that was holding it. In an instant, his small body was fleeing the scene.

—?!

He ran about 3 meters before falling spectacularly on the floor. A moment before falling, he managed to get himself in a falling position that showed he had some martial arts experience. But before he had a time to get up, a huge arm grabbed him by the neck.

—Who do you think you are that you can call a colonel of the City's police a "bastard"?—barked Radcon at the boy that looked at him calmly.

By his grayish skin color, Radcon probably hailed from either the Franc or Germanic Kingdoms, and had been trained and enhanced with some lost technology. He was now a huge unstoppable gray bear of a soldier thanks to the biological technology invented before the Armageddon.

—Hey, hey hey, he's at it again!

—You have a very short temper!

—Colonel, leave at least one arm intact, please! They seemed to be used to their colonel's bursts of anger and were cheering him on dispassionately. The train station's personnel poked out their heads to see what the commotion was at that hour, but they went back to their business when they saw who it was.

—C'mon, say something! Or are you so scared that you are speechless! Show me you're a man! —Radcon demanded as he shook the boy he had grabbed by the neck.

—I dare you to call me a "bastard" again... And I'll show you.

—I don't need you to show me anything.

Even though there was some pain audible in his voice, his voice rang clear even through his scarf.

—I didn't say anything that wasn't true.

—Huh? You're still running your mouth...?

Radcon frowned and moved his face closer to the boy's so he could see it better.

—You... It can't be...?!

A large fist tore the hat from his head, and a full head of long red hair fell from it. Seeing the white face that hid under the hat, Radcon's lips twisted in a lecherous smile.

—Well, well, what do we have here?!

He had uncovered the pale face of a young girl. She had blue eyes that shone like a cat's and very pronounced features unblemished by make-up that made her very attractive. Her elegant lips were pursed by the pain and the insults she was throwing.

—Look here, I found a winner!

Playing with the girl, who resisted like a kitten who didn't want to play, the giant brute laughed, showing his teeth.

—Boys, we're gonna have some fun with this.

—Gee, there goes the colonel back to his old tricks.

—Poor little girl. You won't be going home tonight, girly.

—Colonel, if you are going to share her with us, don't ruin her too much, please.

In between loud shrieks, the giant showed off the girl like a spoil of war. Looking at her straight in the eye, he spit at her with his nicotine-laced breath.

—And what is your name miss?

—Esther... Esther Blanchett.

—What a beautiful name! Well Esther, tonight we are going to get to know each other better... I'll just finish what I have to do, then I'll spoil you until daybreak.

—How dare you?!

She brought her hand to Radcon's face so hard that the sound bounced off the walls. Even while hanging a few feet from the ground, Esther had hit him with all her might.

—Get your dirty hands off me, you jerk! If you let me go right now, I'll let this slide, but I will not tolerate any more from you. —Esther told him coldly, without breaking eye contact with him. Taking into consideration that Radcon was three heads taller than her and that he was three times as big, her bravery was worthy of praise, but in this case her bravery only made things worse.

—You're a brave little girl, huh? —He rubbed his reddened cheek in plain sight of his soldiers.

— I like that...?!

Suddenly the girl was flying through the air while she screamed at the top of her lungs. She violently crashed into the column, and without time to react, she fell to the floor like a broken doll.

—Aaah!

A sigh not quite audible escaped her lips.

—I was hoping to have fun with you after work, but... Getting on top of the girl, he pressed his fingers on her chest.

—Thinking about it better, I'll just have my take here.

Her white skin showed when the cloth that covered it was ripped off her. Her small breasts looked deformed under the huge hands that were on them and her slim legs kicked out in vain.

—Le... Let go!

—Don't move so much! You'll enjoy it soon enough...

Radcon licked his lips as he looked at the girl's pale face. It was more the humiliation than the fear that made her go pale, she was a strong girl, like he had thought. Taking a strong prey like her by force was one of his favorite things.

—Let go of me, jerk!

—I like feisty girls...

Her screams could probably be heard all over the station, but nobody came out to help her.

At that point, Radcon, satisfied to see that Esther had not lost her fighting spirit, moved his hands down to her pants' zipper.

—Now if you'll excuse me...

A calm and collected voice interrupted the girl's screams and Radcon's laughter.

—Sorry to interrupt, but there is something I wanted to ask...

—What, you're still here, jackass? —Radcon's voice echoed throughout the station as he lifted his reddened face full of rage and lust.

In front of him was the young man with glasses. His clear blue eyes showed bewilderment at the scene that was playing in front of him.

—I think I've said it before, but I accidentally broke what she was carrying and I was trying to figure out how to repay her...

—Just leave already, idiot!

—Hey, take the girl and don't let her go!

While his subordinates held her, Radcon slowly got up and looked down at Abel, like a giant grey bear looking at its human prey.

—This...

Abel could feel the giant's breath on his face. He blinked a couple of times, and after clearing his throat, he put on a serious face.

—The Lord's word says "You shall not fornicate".

—Hmph!

A stale noise was heard at the same time that somebody screamed. The young man stumbled after receiving a punch to the head and he fell to the floor.

—I like making women moan, but I also like hearing men's agonizing screams.

Radcon's lips twisted in a cruel smile. He placed one foot on Abel's back, who was on the floor coughing, and grabbed his silver locks.

—!

—Stop!

The painful scream trapped in Abel's throat turned into an agonizing scream by Esther when Radcon started to pick up the arm that held the hairs. Abel's back started

arching under the weight of the boot and the vertebrae started crunching with a sickening sound.

—Let him go! He has nothing to do with this.

—Let's see how much he can take...

While Radcon's face showed a malicious smile, Abel's clear blue eyes were turning white.

—Stop! You're going to kill him!

—Calm down. I'm only going to break his back. He just won't be able to move ever again.

Radcon then started laughing as if he had just said the funniest thing ever. Enjoying the feeling of the crunching spine under him, he extended his arms to give one final tug.

—Let's end this...

—I recommend that you stop now, Colonel Radcon.

A monotonous voice said from behind him, while a pair of gloved hands rested on his shoulders.

—Colonel, it's been four hundred and seventy eight seconds since you abandoned your post. I ask of you to return to your mission as soon as possible.

—What?!

Radcon turned, annoyed, and gave an angry howl when he saw the face of the one who'd interrupted him.

—You, Tres Iqus?

A short man looked up at the giant with impassiveness. He looked to be just over twenty years of age. On the sleeves of his impeccable uniform shined his commander's insignia.

—Commander Iqus, you dare interrupt your superior?

—Negative. It is not my intention to spoil your fun, Colonel. — The young officer said with the same monotonous voice.

—But, right now we are working. I ask of you to put your personal entertainment aside for a later time. The preparations for the escort in sector one-eight-two-seven, which is your job, has not been completed.

—Iqus, idiot, you're just a newbie, and you want to make a fool of me? You don't have to look so serious just because the Marquis likes that — Grunted Radcon before the face of the young man who seemed to wear a mask of impassiveness.

—There is still more than an hour left before the arrival of the Marquis. We only need thirty minutes to get everything ready and even that seems like a lot of time. So now, leave!

—We have just received news that the plans have changed, Colonel. The special train will now be arriving in thirty minutes.

—What?!

Tres Iqus kept talking in the same impassive tone as Radcon's face twitched.

—The time set for the Marquis, Gyula, to arrive is nineteen-hundred hours. That's less than two-thousand seconds. Colonel, I advise that we get in position now.

—Cra...!

Radcon's thick fingers let go and the silver-haired head fell to the floor, a painful scream escaping the lips of its owner. Radcon kicked his side one last time and turned to face his soldiers.

—What are you standing there looking at, idiots? Get moving!—Radcon yelled at his subordinates, angry, but not before giving the young commander a contemptuous look.

He started his march with heavy steps, until suddenly he stopped and turned, as if remembering something.

—I almost forgot... You, take that tall idiot. When we are done with this, take him to Vérhegy. I'll interrogate him personally.

—But he didn't do anything! —screamed Esther, who was now standing up after fixing her clothes.

Her face showed fear and confusion; she almost seemed more scared of the thought of Abel going to Vérhegy than about her almost-rape.

—It's too extreme to send him to Vérhegy. He didn't do anything!

—Shut up, or we'll take you too! Attacks against the Guard, obstruction of a public figure, damages... there's enough reasons to do so. Oh and we can't forget suspicion of espionage too. Commander Iqus, do you have anything to say?

—Negative. You can do as you please, Colonel.

—Well then it's decided.

Showing genuine happiness, Radcon made a signal to his subordinates who laughed evilly.

—Take him.

II

It hadn't been that long since the sun had gone down, and there was still time for the last train. Normally, at that time the station would be buzzing with people who were coming and going, but this evening, when the windowless train stopped in the platform with a screeching sound of nails on a chalkboard, everyone, including the people that worked there had disappeared.

In their place stood the troop of soldiers, decked in their blue uniforms, lines up in a straight line, their rifles on their shoulders. Given the sheer seriousness of the

faces under the hats, it almost seemed like they were dolls instead of men. Even so, anybody with a keen eye could tell that when the train came to a halt, an air of fear passed by the line of soldiers.

—Present arms!

In response to the orders, the rifles stood and their sharp bayonets reflected the light. From between the white smoke that came from the steam engine, the soldier's shadows seemed to grow, their white breath rising in the night.

—Welcome.

There remained none of the conceitedness the giant had been exhibiting a moment ago when he saluted the train's only passenger. Radcon bowed so low that it seemed his hat would fall off.

—You must be tired from your long trip, Marquis.

—Thank you for coming to greet me, Colonel. The person thanking the giant was a handsome young man. His beautiful white face contrasted by a mesh of jet-black hair and combined with his tall, slender body covered in an Inverness coat, made him fit right in with that city's grayness. His eyes were like those of a werewolf. From inside the light gray irises shone a pair of pupils that were darker than the night itself and it unnerved anyone who stared at them. Maybe it was because those never blinked, not even once.

Lifting his coat's collar, the young aristocrat spoke with a low voice:

—Has there been any happenings in my absence?

Some things happened. The Partisans made some noise, but we subdued them. We captured their leader and send him to Vérhegy. You can rest easy.

More than a loyal slave, the giant's demeanor was more akin to a trained dog. Acknowledging Radcon's overly polite responses, the young man started walking about the platform with an elegant stride. The soldiers formed a human shield around him.

—Did you enjoy your trip to the Empire?

—It was annoying, like always. Apparently they are not interested in helping with our cause. And I was also not able to meet with Empress Augusta ...But I'm sure they'll come around once they see the power of that thing...

Without missing a beat, the aristocrat's lips formed a semi-smile, and an evil look took over his handsome features. Could it be an effect of the fangs jutting from under the lips?

—The restoration of the hardware is almost complete. We just need to try out the software and wait for a proper time to use is...by the way, what is that?

With a look on his face like someone who had come home to find a new pet, Gyula, the Marquis made a motion to a corner of the platform. Hanging from

between two guards and tied up from head to toe, the silver-haired man waited, weary of his ordeal.

—Oh, he's a suspicious man we found here at the station. He bad-mouthed the City Guard and he'll be taken to the station for interrogation.

—Hmmm!

He was about to pass him by when the marquis stopped and headed towards the silver haired man.

—What is your name?

—Abel Nightroad — the man said weakly, his lips torn and bloody. His face was bruised from the blows he had received. —I come from Rome, and I was supposed to present myself to the place I'm supposed to stay at by orders of the Va...

— Don't speak more than you're supposed to!

One of Abel's coat buttons went flying when the giant grabbed him by the neck.

—Only answer the question, idiot!

—Colonel, wait.

Radcon looked so angry that it seemed like he would eat Abel right then and there, but the Marquis Gyula gently restrained him when he saw the clothes that shown from under Abel's somewhat battered coat and the crucifix that hanged from his chest.

—A habit and a crucifix. Are you a priest?

—Yes, I'm the priest that has been assigned to the Saint Matthias Cathedral in Istavan— said Abel, twitching in pain from still being held by the neck,

– I haven't done any...

—I told you to shut up!

—It is you who needs to shut up, Colonel... Let the priest go.

—Bu... but, your Excellency...

—I'm telling you to let him go, have you not heard me?— Gyula, the Marquis, whispered, giving a look at the giant, who looked at him, gaping.

The aristocrat was not a strong-looking man, but his stare was so icy that it made Radcon go pale.

—I don't care if you like to abuse your authority with your comrades, or better yet, I'm not interested in your exploits...but I cannot tolerate a misbehaving dog, are you understanding?

—I ask that you forgive my transgression.

Ignoring Radcon, who lowered his head and slumped, the Marquis walked over Abel and bowed slightly, while the priest rubbed his sore neck.

—I am very sorry for this. I am Gyula Kádár, the city's administrator. I cannot demonstrate my regret enough for the way some citizens of Istavan have treated you.

—Thank you for your amiability.

The priest lowered his head in reverence. He was very tall, and his features, lined by the silver hair and clear blue eyes, were proportionate to the body, but his expression was that of a child ready to start playing on the floor at any moment. Without being rude, the Marquis eyed the priest intently, an internal struggle growing within him as he wondered if he had seen that priest somewhere before.

—I'm sorry Father, but have we met before?

—I don't think so. This is my first time coming to this city....

—Of course...Compared to Rome, this place is nothing more than a boring province. I ask that you enjoy your stay.

Letting out a dignified laugh, the aristocrat extended his hand towards the priest. After all, that man didn't seem to be anything more than just a simple priest. Without ever being discourteous, he gave the priest an indifferent hand shake, and added some clichéd words on top of it.

—Welcome to Istavan, Father Nightroad. Our city welcomes you cordially.

—Ah! Many thanks.

The priest answered the handshake in his usual scatter-brained tone, but when he looked at the Marquis face, he went pale .

Could it be that I clasped his hand too tightly? Thought the Marquis, but he then realized that the look wasn't for him, but for something behind him. In that very moment the priest pushed down the Marquis with a strength not becoming of his thin arms.

—What are you doing, you idiot? —Radcon angrily yelled, but a loud noise broke through the silence of the night and something scrapped by his nose.

The object that had just barely avoided the Marquis's head hit the train with a shrill metallic sound. It was equipped with a rudder and a steel rod as thick as a finger

—This is... a crossbow bolt!

A soldier who was about to give the alarm fell to the ground with the same object embedded in his shoulder. The soldier who was standing beside him was hit in the stomach as he lifted his rifle.

And in an instant... the night exploded.

From the tracks and the lobby huge lightning bolts appeared, followed by gun shots. The golden fire concentrated themselves on the platform and a lot of the soldiers fell before they even knew what had hit them.

—¡Enemy attack! It's the Partisans!

Where could they have hidden? Hooded figures with masks came out from everywhere. It was obvious by the weapons they carried that they weren't there for a costume party.

—Get moving! Get a move on counter-attacking! —Radcon yelled in vain. The bullets fell in a regular rhythm. The Molotov cocktails flew drawing golden arches and when they exploded, the burning gasoline ran in a blink of an eye throughout the platform, illuminating it like a theater stage by the flames-crazed dance.

—Don't worry about the minions! Gyula, get Gyula!—a shrill voice rose from the shadows from where the first dart had come from.

The deadly weapon had graced Abel's cheek, who had remained standing in complete shock, and it had come to land on the train behind him. From it, emanated a strong odor that suggested it had been dipped in acid or something similar.

—Hey, hey, hey! My revolver! Yes, my revolver! Where did my revolver go?

—Get down, Father!

At the very moment the priest lowered his head to look in his pockets, the marquis took off his coat and shook it with a surprising agility, like a bull fighter, dodging the arrows shot at him. Either way, the fact that the shooter shot with such precision wasn't normal either.

Looking towards where the arrows were coming from, the last cabin of the train, the Marquis's face lit up with a thin smile.

—What ability, but...Colonel!

—Yes!

Even though as people they were worthless, as soldiers they were impeccable. The City Guard's soldiers that had been annihilated by the first rounds had started to return fire now that they had gotten themselves together. The assailants kept firing, but they had already lost the newness the surprise attack had afforded them. Even the Molotov cocktails which exploded in mid-air were little more than lamps that gave away their positions.

—They don't seem to be that many of them. Send a dozen men to the left to corner them.

—Roger that. Commander Iqus! Let's circle them on the left!

—Positive.

The young officer nodded in agreement without expression and started walking down the platform accompanied by the soldiers. The enemy seemed to have noticed the strategy because their line of fire faltered for a bit.

—Don't let those damn Partisans get away!

Radcon took his position with a huge weapon while he licked his lips in glee. In order to protect their fleeing companions, the shooters kept shooting their arrows without aim, just to have a distraction.

—!

A scream of pain was overheard. A small shadow that carried an automatic crossbow fell to the floor while grabbing its shoulder. At that sight, a Partisan yelled:

—Csillag, are you ok?!

Armed with a homemade machine gun, the Partisan approached the figure with the crossbow. Apparently he decided that there was no reason to continue the fight because he yelled at his comrades:

—The plan has failed. Get away, Csillag, I'll stay behind to cover your retreat!

The small figure said something from under the mask, but the sound of bullets muffled its voice. The Partisan talked again:

—This is insane! What would we do if we lost our leader? Leave with the rest of us, I'll cover for you!

The City Guard's force was getting stronger because the unit that awaited outside had joined in the fray when they realized the situation.

The archer they called Csillag remained silent for a second, but hearing the Partisan's screams, he relented to his chagrin. He sounded the whistle loudly, and at the sound of the whistle, the attackers started retreating into the shadows.

—Hey, don't let those terrorists escape!

Radcon pointed his weapon at the back of the small figure, smiling like a hyena ready to pounce on its prey, aiming his gun carefully.

—Dammit!

—I found it!

At that precise moment a stupid joyous exclamation was heard. The priest who had been looking in his pockets for a while now had finally found his antique percussion revolver. He clumsily aimed the gun and placed his finger on the trigger.

—Hahaha! With this baby here I am as efficient as 100 men! You won't get away now, you terrorists--! Huh?

A great white cloud followed the bold speech.

A percussion revolver was a repetitious weapon equipped with a trigger mechanism for firing a bullet by allowing the gunpowder to be inserted directly

into the cylinder, instead of using a cartridge, and it seemed like the gunpowder had gotten wet, hence the white cloud that prevented a clear view.

—Cough, cough, cough! What just happened?

—Sorry, sorry, sorry...

—This is all your fault, you motherfucking priest!

—Wait, Csillag is getting away!

Taking advantage of the situation, Csillag had turned around and had disappeared from the line of fire, but between the smoke and the darkness, the shots only helped to pierce the night. By then, the fight was mostly over.

The floor was filled with dead and dying people, and every so often a sporadic shot was heard inside the station, but the city guards were left alone.

—Let's count our losses!

—Tend to the injured fast!

—Don't kill the prisoners! Tied them up so we can interrogate them!

—Are you ok, Father?

The night's entertainment had ended. In between soldier's wails, the Marquis extended his hand to the priest, who was coughing, his eyes filled with tears.

—I must thank you. You saved my life tonight.

—Don't worry about it. Who were those people? You said something about Partisans?

—They are terrorists that live in this city.

Radcon clenched his jaw, angry that his prey had escaped.

—Lead by that person they call Csillag, they kill well-known people, they sabotage public works... In short, they are scum that cause all kinds of problems.

—Ok, get a move on!

Violently pushing, the soldiers were walking an injured Partisan through the platform. It was the one who had stayed behind to cover for his leader's escape.

—Good Evening, Mr. Terrorist.

The Marquis coolly greeted the face covered in blood and dirt and smiled sweetly at the man thrown at his feet.

—You didn't have to come greet me. I'm glad that you're doing so well...

—Monster!

The terrorist's voice seemed to come from the deepest level of Hell. His very swollen lips spouted words full of rage and hate, all the while staring at the Marquis beautiful face.

—You are a monster than has made this city your lair! Because of you, this place...! Ah!

—Easy there, scum!

Receiving Radcon's kick to the stomach, the terrorist curled up in pain. The red and white liquid that fell from his mouth puddled at his feet.

—Your Excellency, such rudeness in your presence!!

—Stop that, Colonel. The man is injured.

Before the white-haired priest could say anything, the Marquis voice stopped the giant brute.

—If you injure him anymore, he won't be able to say anything. Better yet, make sure someone sees the Father safely to his place. Take him to the cathedral before it gets too late.

—Oh, don't worry about--

The Marquis stopped Abel's movements with a hand gesture and made his wishes known.

—I won't take a 'no' for an answer. You are the man that saved my life tonight ... Commander Iqus, prepare the car.

—Positive. This way, if you please, Father Nightroad.

Following the unexpressive officer, the priest prepared to exit the platform when a voice sounded behind him.

—Oh, by that way father—the black-haired young man asked off-handedly, as if he had just remembered something— before coming here, what job did you perform in Rome?

—Oh! I was the chaplain in the town's church. The day before yesterday I suddenly received the order to come here. I myself don't quite get it...I wonder if I did something wrong? Maybe it was due to that one time? Maybe it was that day I got drunk and started preaching to some ads and one of my superiors saw me...

—... Of course...

Had anyone noticed a pause before the priest answered? The Marquis undaunted as usual, responded with a gesture, as if to apologize for his impertinence.

—Please forgive my impertinence in asking you such a personal question when we just met. My men will accompany you to the cathedral. I hope you have a good night.

—Thank you. Now if you'll excuse me.

The priest left after a short goodbye and the marquis remained still on the platform, watching as the priest's tall figure disappeared in the distance. Once Abel had disappeared completely, the nobleman lowered his gaze towards the Partisan that lay at his feet..

—By the way, I still have not heard what you have to say to...

—?!

The man did not even get a chance to open his mouth.

—The beautiful hand moved with agility and grabbed him by the neck, lifting him in the air.

—What did you call me before? Monster?

—Aaah!

His arm was terrifyingly strong. The force he had shown when he lifted a man with one hand was not human. Even so, what crossed that Partisan's eyes wasn't awe, it was terror. Those were the eyes of a man on death row who already knew his destiny.

The mouth of the aristocrat who held him opened slowly. Between his lips a pointy tongue and shiny canines appeared, too long to be normal. As if he was going to taste wine, the Marquis brought his mouth close to the condemned's neck.

—Nooo!

The man's painful scream stopped abruptly.

With an awful sound, his extremities shook, as if an electric wave had passed through them. Meanwhile his stiff arms and legs gave their final spasms; the Marquis did not separate his face from the throat. The noble's throat moved in a macabre way, all the while the drops that fell from his lips formed a reddish puddle at his feet.

When the aristocrat lifted his face, with a satisfied reddish breath, the eyes of the man had almost fallen out of his sockets. On his white face, like lime, there was no sign of life. Actually, as soon as the marquis loosened his fingers, the man crumpled to the floor like a paper doll and didn't move again.

—The quantity wasn't bad, but the flavor was off...How would Csillag's taste? I wonder if I can compare flavors next time.

The Marquis approached the man, who kept convulsing slowly in the puddle of blood he had created and he whispered in his ear, even though he received no answer:

— Vile Terran. Your city? Don't make me laugh. This is my city... Colonel!

—Yes, your Excellency!

The soldier's sweaty faces could not hide their terror. The giant came forward from amongst the lines and, while he cleaned his lips, the Marquis ordered:

—Tell our informants to investigate that priest. Something about him bothers me.

—Understood!

After that terse reply, Radcon gave a polite bow hiding the expression on his face. Behind him, the soldiers picked up the dead bodies. Ignoring the fear and loathing, the Marquis turned around and started walking through the platform in long strides.

Had the Vatican noticed something?

He hadn't heard anything about Saint Matthias Cathedral, the only church in the city, needing anyone. Besides, it was too convenient that they send a new chaplain just as he was finishing the preparations for *that*.

—People like that won't be able to stop me ... but either way, we need to get rid of any inconveniences.

It would be best to let his informants know immediately. If that priest was a Vatican dog...

Actually, I really don't care...

He looked like a very tasty man.

The aristocrat opened his mouth slightly, out of which his pointy tongue showed through.

III

—Welcome to Istavan, Father Nightroad. I am the one in charge of this church, the Bishop Laura Vitez.

—Thank you very much.

The bishop that smiled at him from across the table still looked young, despite being thirty. Abel returned the smile, twisting his lips a bit. From the feeble light the lamp gave off, the lanky priest checked the bookshelves, which, full of sacred texts, practically covered the walls of the room.

—I've been told about what happened at the station. I am very sorry that you had to start your job so soon. But don't worry; as long as you're in this church, the Lord will protect you.

Abel continued to smile humbly while the bishop crossed herself respectfully.

Saint Matthias Cathedral was a gothic cathedral of great personality, surrounded by high walls. Originally it had been situated on the west side of the city, at the other side of the river, but during the reconstruction it underwent after the Armageddon, it had been transferred to the opposite river bank and restored there. It was a building with history.

Abel, after witnessing the shooting, was finding it hard to settle down. To live in a city that dangerous, more than God's protection, he might be needing the help of a good drink.

—Are you feeling sick, Father Nightroad? You don't look so good.

—Ah! So...sorry. I was thinking about something else. I am a little tired...

—Forgive my rudeness. Do you want to retire to your chambers for the night...? Sister Esther, are you there?!

—Yes, my lady bishop!

From behind Abel a thin voice was heard, like that of a hand bell and the sound of agile steps entering the office.

—My lady bishop called me?

—Take Father Nightroad to his room. You can go to bed after that.

—Yes, my lady bishop. This way, Father Nightroad, if you may...

—Thank you for... Eh?

The priest frowned when he turned.

A petite adolescent novice lit his way with a candle, but what had surprised Able was the face. The red hair that showed through the blue cap and the white, smiling face.

—You... you're the girl from the station!

—We meet again, huh, father? Thank you for your help back there.

Without a doubt, the figure that was smiling at him stretching out a hand to him was the same girl in the hat. Of course, now she wasn't wearing it, nor did she look like a boy. Her blue habit, trimmed in white indicated that she was a novice.

—Ah! You already met Father Nightroad, Esther?

—Yes, we met this afternoon, when I was running some errands around the city. There was a problem with the city police and the Father helped me. Thank you for everything, Father Nightroad. I am the novice Esther Blanchett.

—Oh! It's a pleasure. What a surprise finding you here. So, you're a nun...

With his mouth open and without taking his eyes off her, Abel shook the hand that the girl held out to him.

He hadn't been able to study her in the afternoon, but now that he got the chance, the truth was that she was a very pretty girl. She had blue eyes like lapis lazuli, that shone brightly, and her well defined features stood out in that city full of monotonous faces, of black hair and eyes. Under her well shaped nose, her thin lips had an almost aristocratic air. Judging by her name, it was evident that she wasn't a native. Could she be a native of Albion?

—Is there something on my face?

—Eh? Ah, no, no, no it's nothing.

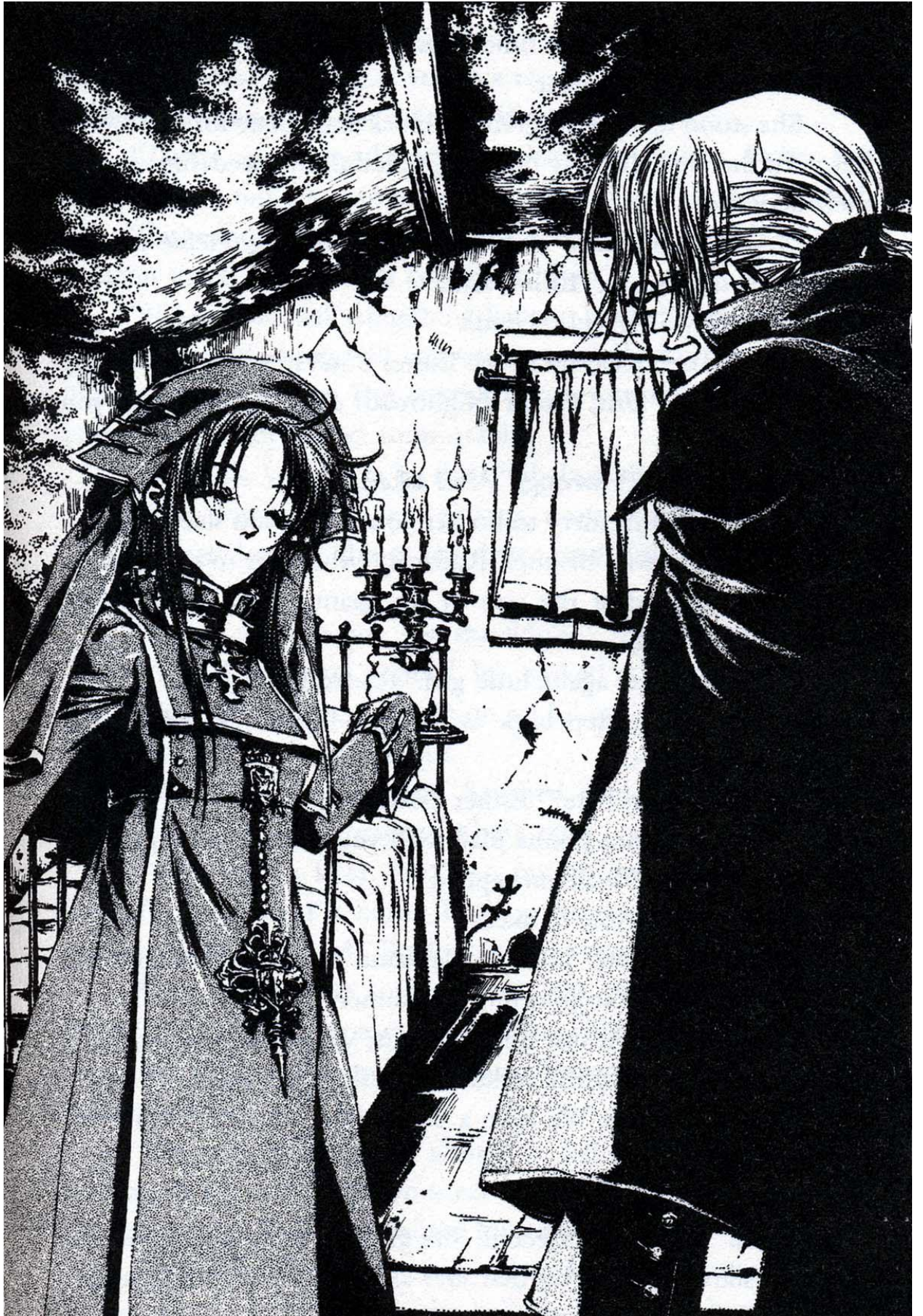
Taken by surprise by the unexpected question, Abel tensed and he craned his neck. For a moment the novice looked at the priest like a strange beast.

—Right, so, I'll show you to your room. Let me take your luggage.

—Ah! Thank you very much. Your grace, if you'll excuse me.

—Have a good night, Father Nightroad.

—Good night...



“What luck, I am going to be living under the same roof as such a cute girl.”

Forgetting the mess from the afternoon, the hunger and the darkness of the hallways, Abel followed the girl. Well, it had been a tiring afternoon, but the next day seemed like it was going to be better. His superior seemed nice, the air was clean, the girls were cute ...

Istavan was starting to grow on him.

—We’re here. This is your room, Father.

—What a... cozy room!

Abel’s voice deflated like a popped balloon.

The candlelight showed a room as small as a coffin. The furnishings were a bed with just the right dimensions, if he bend his knees and lowered his head until he made a right angle, and a closet the size of a wallet. The ceiling was very low and was full of undecipherable stains that looked like human faces. From the window a thin piece of cloth hung. The possibility of that being the curtain could not be discarded.

—This... could it be that you might have gotten the rooms confused? Is this a joke?

—Isn’t it a magnificent room? When we found out that Rome was sending an elite chaplain, we worked hard to prepare the room. You can do whatever you want with it.

—Thank you very much.

He would not be defeated by this.

Make do with what you have, they said, right?

Even though the standards were vastly different, he would be patient. Of course, it could also be that this was a new way to torment him.

—We get up at 4 am. The matins are at 4:30. The gathering is in the chapel; please, don’t be late. You can put the laundry in the basket in the baths that has your name on it. Let’s see, what else was I going to tell you?

—Esther, may I ask you something?

—Of course, what is it?

Esther cocked her head, looking at the priest, who had taken a seat on the bed, dejected. The delicate red hairs shone lightly under the candle’s light.

—When we met at the station, why were you dressed like that?

—Dressed like that? Ah! You mean why was I wearing boy’s clothes? That’s the safest way to go around in that zone.

—Safest?

—Yes. Lately the city is becoming more and more dangerous, and it is dangerous for women to be out alone. It’s a safety measure.

Abel nodded in agreement, crossing his arms.

—In the station I was involved in a shootout with those they call Partisans. I was very scared, especially by the shots from their leader, some person named Csillag. If I had taken one false step, I would be dead right now.

—Ah, the Partisans! Luckily you got out of there unscathed.

—Well, I am not hurt, but I was really, really scared.

—...

—Without taking any notice to the quiet girl, who was having trouble answering, Abel continued to mumble.

—What a place I've come too. Provincial, insecure ... My superiors from personnel tricked me. Not everything in life is controllable.

—Ah, yes?

—This happens to me often, especially with my superior in Rome. She's cruel and heartless, with an impassiveness that cannot be matched; very proper, but cold ... An inhuman demon. She's made me cry lots of times... Well, it seems that here my superior is nice, so I can rest easy.

—The Bishop Vitez? Yes, she's a really nice person.

Esther nodded while she stroked the rosary. Her face lightened up as if she were talking proudly about her own mother.

—Since I was a child, she's looked after me as if she were my mother.

—Yes, I grew up in this cathedral.

Could it be she was abandoned as a baby?

—Oh, look at the time!

Looking at the clock that stood tall from the other side of the window, Esther got up quickly. In the outside world, 9 o'clock was early, but inside the church, taking into consideration the time they got up, it was time to go to bed.

—I'll come to wake you up tomorrow. Try not to catch cold; cover yourself well with the blanket.

—Thank you for everything.

He'd walk Esther to the door; he'd go to bed after that.

—Father Nightroad? Can I bother you for a minute?

Someone knocked softly on the door. It was Bishop Vitez, she stuck her head in through the door.

—Your Grace! What brings you here?

—I am very sorry to disturb you just as you were going to bed, but the truth is that ...

—Your Grace, move, you're in the way.

A huge shadow rudely pushed the bishop away from the door. The figure was so tall that he touched the ceiling. Esther was breathless.

—Eh, you? The city police?

—We meet again, eh, miss?

The gigantic colonel Radcon laughed, curling his thick lips while he stared lecherously at Esther, who had backed up a little. Maybe she was remembering the horrible experience of that afternoon.

—Why are you here? This is...

—Eh! This is none of your business. I'm here for the priest.

—Eh? For me?

Radcon nodded at the priest, who stared at him blinking.

—His Excellency, the Marquis, Gyula wants to see you. Come, get moving. I think he wants to invite you for dinner.

—The Marquis? At this time? But we just saw each other. It's kind of sudden, isn't it? Did something happen?

—What the hell do I know? Hurry up, the car is waiting for us outside...

—Ah...

—Listen! —interrupted Esther, and she began talking to the priest who was getting ready to leave, in an accelerated manner—. It's really late. I'd be better if you didn't go out...

—Impossible —Radcon said, showing off his crooked teeth as he shook his head.

—Nobody in this city can refuse an invitation from Vérhegy.

—Where is the law that prohibits it? Besides, the Father just arrived; he's not from Istavan.

—Whatever, it won't be the young lady the one to decide this, but the priest... What are you doing?

—Truth be told, I don't really care.

Radcon leaned his cumbersome figure forward.

—I, too, am a gentleman, but from tomorrow onwards, some bad things could start happening to the people of this church...

—Bad things?

—Lately we can no longer feel safe anywhere... Windows break, things get stolen, nuns get assaulted while out shopping...

—Father, don't worry about it. Nothing will happen to us. You...

—I'll go with you.

Esther didn't have time to say any more. Abel nodded with the same clueless face as always.

—Since the Marquis so kindly invited me, it would be rude to say no. I'll go with you.

—Father!

—Very well, come along. A priest that knows what he's talking about.

Radcon nodded, glancing at Esther, who whined piteously. Two soldiers, who up to that point had remained quiet outside in the hallway, grabbed Abel, one from each arm.

—Well, our job here is done. Sorry for interrupting your date, but I'll be taking this young man ... Next time, I'll be the young lady's date. We'll have a deep conversation. I'm sure you'll enjoy it.

After glancing lecherously at the novice's hips, Radcon let out a loud snort and turned. Behind him, the soldiers followed, grabbing the priest's slender shoulders with force.

—There is nothing to worry about, Esther —said Abel, turning his head.

He looked like a criminal that they had arrested.

—They won't eat me. I'll be back by tomorrow morning. Save my breakfast, ok...? Your Grace, with your permission.

—Goodbye, your Grace. Well, well, this church is full of cute girls. I need to come back some other day.

Abel smiled slightly, followed by the giant brute. Even after they had disappeared from view, Esther didn't move from her spot. Bishop Vitez and the rest of the clergy had gone back to their rooms, looking worried, and Esther remained there alone, looking out the window while biting her lips.

—Incredible. How's that "They won't eat me"? That's precisely what we fear, that they'll eat you!

Esther sighed —half annoyed, half worried—, and she quickly turned around.

IV

There was not an explanation anywhere in the world as to how they had come to be.

Here were those who said that they were a race that had come from the horrible dark past.

Here were also rumors that they were the result of the epidemics that had ravished the border regions and that had provoked sudden mutations.

Even though the Vatican considered it heterodox, there existed the theory that they were otherworldly inhabitants that had appeared together with the Second Moon, when it started shining in the southern sky, after the Armageddon.

Nobody had any reliable source.

The Armageddon. The huge disaster in which humanity came close to extinction, thanks to nuclear and biological weapons. A contamination that was not going to go away in hundreds of years had erased all technologically advanced civilization and half of the territory. Then, suddenly, they appeared. Humanity in

decay had no way of fighting their superior technology and their literally monstrous strength.

If the Vatican, like an international organization, hadn't gathered the bits and pieces of humanity, and if it hadn't been by numerous miraculous occurrences, that could only be seen as divine intervention, no doubt that humans would be under their command now. However, as it is well known, the one that ended the war between both races was humanity. After a long battle, humanity returned their enemies, soundly defeated, back into the darkness that had created them and started moving forward towards reconstruction after the dark times after the Armageddon.

Peacefully?

Was it really like that?

Certainly, more than 500 years ago they had been expelled from society. Even so, why was it that the dire shadows that lived in the darkness sometimes disturbed the peaceful sleep of people? Why was it fervently asked in the meetings at the Papal Palace to organize a crusade East, towards where they were rumored to dwell?

The fight between them and humanity still raged.

To the members of that intelligent species that had appeared in the world after the Armageddon, people called them, according to ancient traditions, "vampire".

—The free city of Istavan. It is an independent city-state geographically situated east of Rome, between our eastern front and the Empire.

With the sweet voice, in the darkness, an image of the city had appeared that looked like a well crafted pearl.

Exotic streets filled with countless domes and spires. On the huge river that crossed the city, beautiful bridges connected the western half (Buda) and the Eastern part (Pest) reflecting the prosperity of what was once known as the Pearl of the Danube.

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—Officially, the political power is held a municipal assembly that governs the city. However, like my distinguished audience already knows, the reality is that they are nothing more than the puppets of the marquis of Hungary, or better yet, of them...

—That's enough, Caterina. We are not here to take a geography class.

At the same time that a voice, strong as steel was heard, light flooded the darkness.

It was a huge room.

The light came from a magnificent sun roof that represented a group of armed knights, armed with crucifixes that expelled a crowd of armed demons. Leading the knights, a beautiful winged woman crossed her sword with three demon kings.

Rome, Sant'Angelo Castle, Sancta Naia room.

In the middle of the room, a multitude of figures in red and purple robes sat around a huge meeting table, from which holograms floated. The holders from the Secretary of State, the Treasury, the Ministry of Information, the Safety Agency... They were the highest officials of the Vatican's central government.

—Get to the point, Caterina. The border patrol that was shot a few days ago by unidentified forces ... Is there any doubt that the shots were made by the free city of Istavan's police force? — A man with thin, sharp eyes asked.

His muscular body was covered with a scarlet habit, that identified him as a cardinal, but his endless energy and his fighting spirit, ready to act upon any threat, marked him as true soldier, the ones that are always found in the front line.

Cardinal Francesco di Medici, Duke of Florence. Bastard son of the previous Pope, and half brother of the actual one. He was an extremely important man in the Vatican, since he held positions as president of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, general inquisitor and commander in chief of the Holy See's armies.

Puffing out his chest, that was extremely robust for him being a clergy member, Francesco barked:

—More than getting close to our borders, the problem is already inside the Holy See's territory. Our troops were attacked inside our own territory. This is a critical situation. I say that we punish Istavan severely, and make the full weight of justice befall the vampires that live there. What do your eminences think?

—Brother, wait...

A soft female voice answered to the combative words of the Cardinal. The woman, who had remained standing this whole time, was asking to speak with a small hand movement.

—I don't believe I said for sure that we are talking about Istavan's armed guard. I just said that the possibility is high.

Her beauty, almost fragrant, contrasted with Francesco. Regarding her age, she was about 25 years old. Behind her monocle, hers was a handsome face, whose subtle expression did not show any melancholy or annoyance. She had the elegant and indolent bearing of an aristocrat, yet, her red clothes and embroidered golden cross denoted that she too was a cardinal: the person who got all the higher ups from the Vatican together in one place.



The beautiful woman, whose gaze was as sharp as a razor blade behind her monocle, was the Duchess of Milan, Cardinal Caterina Sforza.

In a soft voice, she continued her debate.

—Besides, until now, the vampire of Istavan, the Marquis of Hungary, has remained in the shadows, shielded by the municipal counsel. Even if we make our investigations public, unilaterally assassinating him won't sit well with the public. What we need to do now is remain calm until we get concrete proof.

—Hmm! Cardinal Sforza is right.

Voices around the table rose in approval of the beautiful woman's words. The more veteran cardinals nodded firmly.

—It is never too late to take action and squash those vampires like they deserve, but if we move out army without reason, it's certain that we will turn all the secular states against us.

—That's true. Times have changed. Those bastards are always trying to find wrong in whatever we do.

—The Marquis of Hungary is not stupid enough to openly pick a fight with the Vatican. While he keeps shielding himself with the puppet counsel, it is best not to make rash decisions ...

—Why are you cowering under the world's opinion? We are the Vatican, the representation of God's will on Earth!

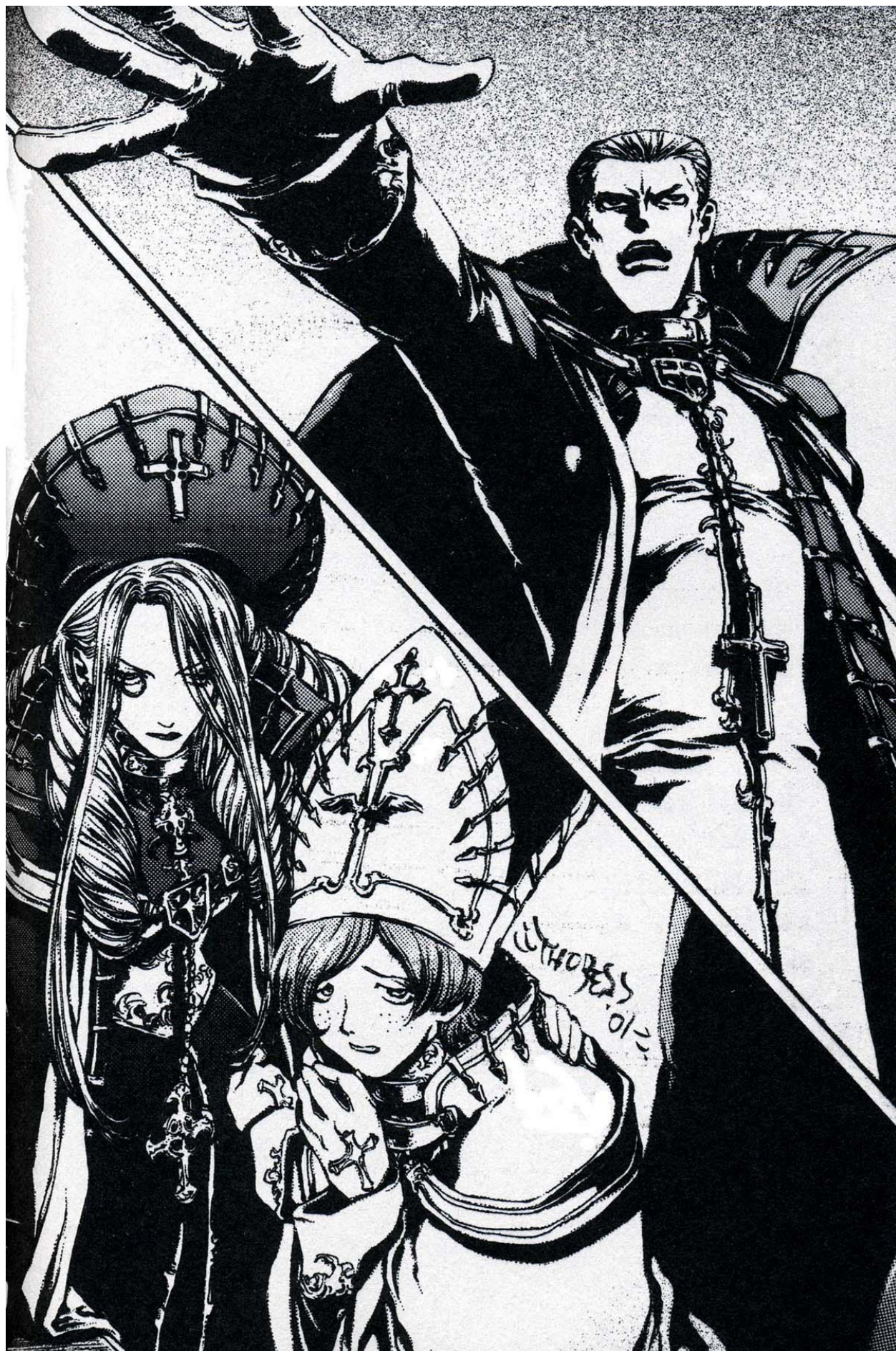
A dominating voice cut through all the murmuring around the table. Francesco has gotten up from his seat pounding the table hard.

—Whatever the reason, it is not normal that we have taken the fact that the vampires have taken over a city sitting down! Don't forget what we are. We are the Vatican. The representation of God's will on Earth!

—Cardenal Medici is right.

—We are the representatives of God on Earth. We shouldn't back down for fear of what the secular world will think of us.







The voices that spoke up in favor of Francesco belonged to the younger cardinals, who shouted, their fists up in the air and their faces contorted by the excitement. Encouraged by the words of support, Francesco continued his speech with vehemence.

—Your Eminences, let's reflect on this well! What we have to talk about is how are we going to punish the vampires of Istavan for their hostilities! If we crush the source of all evil, the rest of the world won't have any reason to complain!

—Agreed, Cardinal Medici proposed to crush the source of all evil, but ...

Smiling gracefully, but without ever losing the coolness in her eyes, Caterina answered her brother.

—What exactly do you propose we do? Please, explain.

—The normal protocol...

In response to his sister's hostility, the baritone voice continued with fervor.

—First off, we sent the army to Istavan and annex the territory militarily. After, look for all the vampires that dwell in the city and publicly burn them. Thereby, we will fulfill our role as representatives of the divine will on Earth. Or don't you think that, Your Holiness?

This last phrase was not directed at the general public, but at the figure that up until that moment had remained silent sitting between Caterina and Francesco. He then lifted his face, surprised.

—Eh? Eh? A... annex?

The soft and stuttering voice belonged to a teenager. In contrast with the figures that surrounded him, he looked mediocre. His skinny body showed no vigor, and his freckled face was plain, a far cry from majestic or handsome. Despite that, the white clothes that enveloped him were unmistakable. They were the proof that he was the highest representative of God on Earth, the leader of the Vatican.

—S... so... that... that means that there is going to be a war, brother? Sister?

The Pope Alessandro XVIII, number three hundred and ninety-nine, stuttered violently with effort, stealing a glance at Caterina and seeming like he was about to burst into tears.

—Ar... ar... are we going to start a war with Istavan?

—But the worst thing is that Istavan won't be our only enemy.

Caterina signaled the hologram that floated over the table with her Cardinal's cane, and she addressed her younger brother with as much politeness as she could muster.

—Alec, think about our geological situation. Istavan borders our territory to the south, with human estates like the Germanic Kingdom, to the north and west, and with the Empire to the east. How do you think things will look territory-wise, if we occupy

the city? We would need a very good pretext in order to avoid resistance when we send our troops, don't you think?

—Of course. Brother, you've heard what our sister had to say. So the deployment of troops ...

—Caterina! Damn it! What kind of stupid ideals are you trying to feed the Holy Father? How is that possible?!

Given the loud, violent voice, the adolescent Pope looked like he was about to faint. Unconsciously, he cuddled against his sister. Francesco had once again turned his chair over.

—We are the Vatican, the representatives of God on Earth. Why are we backing down? Besides, it was them that started this by igniting the fight. What is stopping us from giving them what they deserve?

—That we have no proof. Let's supposed that following this, we find a vampire, we still don't know why he's acting this way. Why is he provoking us now?

—Isn't that the job of the State Department that is also your department, Caterina?

—I don't need you to tell me what I need to do. We are working on it ... but we need more time. While our investigation is still active, I cannot give my consent, as Secretary of State, to a punishing expedition.

The siblings shared an icy stare, full of rivalry. Neither wanted to give the other the upper hand.

—In that case, there is nothing to do...

However, the one that gave in first, against all odds, was Francesco, who shrugged as if he saw an invisible spark.

—You have one week to finish your investigation.

—Thank you very much.

—In exchange...

Francesco's voice changed, as if changing his mind, and stared at his sister with cold regard, as if ready to bring her down.

—If in one week your investigations don't advance, the Vatican will engage in forceful interrogation and will take military action. There are no objections, right?

Once in her office, Caterina clucked her tongue, exasperated.

—One week time limit... Or, the time he needs to prepare his troops. My brother is an old fox.

It wasn't that she was completely against military action; it was obvious that they needed to show the world what could happen if they underestimated the Vatican.

But the problem was the pretext. It was essential to find a way to show the world Istavan's actions against the Vatican.

It had been one thousand years since that terrible Armageddon. The Vatican's power, which had lead humanity during the reconstruction, was diminishing, judging by the growth of secular states. It seemed like the young cardinals, headed by Francesco, still believed in the Vatican's old power, but their vision was naively optimistic. If they were to send their troops to Istavan, the secular states would criticize the Vatican as if they were waiting for this moment. But above all else, there was the problem of the Empire. It was imperative to avoid crossing the only non-human state on Earth at all costs.

*That's why we need a convincing excuse...*

Caterina stroked her chin as she thought about it. Suddenly, she lifted her sharp eyes, and whispered to the darkness:

—Are you there, Sister Kate?

—Yes, Your Eminence.

Along with the quiet voice, a hologram of a nun appeared next to Caterina. The slightly closed eyes shined with serenity, giving her an air of elegance. Is it something urgent, Your Eminence?

How are the preparations of the Iron Maiden II coming along? Can it take flight immediately?

—We are about to. It can take flight at any moment now.

—Ok. Place her on course to Istavan.

Before the kneeling figure, Caterina vehemently added:

There has been a slight change in the orders of our infiltrated agents Krusnik and Gunslinger. I want them to look for something.

## **Chapter 2**

# **THE DARK BANQUET**

... they come to kill you; yes, this night they come to kill you.

Nehemiah 6,10

### **I**

The grey air of the night settled in the city like a hole.

That was not to say that the streets visible through the windows weren't up to par with all other big capitals. The rows of trees were beautiful, covered in snow as if they were wearing a cotton hat, and in the cobbled streets, the lights, arranged in curved designs, competed in magnificent form in beauty. That exquisite scenery, even though not up to par with Rome, was up to par with other world-class cities like Londinium or Vienna.



However, if one paid enough attention through the darkness, it was not hard to see the signs of desolation. In fact, it was hard not to notice.

Half the street lamps were broken and potholes covered the street tiles. Even though night had just fallen, there was not a single soul that could be seen out in the streets, and the windows were all shut tight, as if holding their breath. However, the Guard control posts that were scattered every few feet were perfectly illuminated and groups of soldiers showed off their guns ostentatiously.

Poverty and desolation. There was no sign of the Pearl of the Danube, the beautiful city that never slept.

—What pity! It seems the whole city has become a slum.

—It's all the fault of those anti-governmental terrorists. It's those Partisans.

Seated with his arms crossed next to the priest, who was observing the city with pity, the giant curled his lips without changing his posture. As if laughing at him for his ignorance, or maybe out of pity, he said:

—Those people sabotage things all over the city. They steal food, destroy water and gas ducts ... Thanks to them, the city is in decadence. Lots of citizens have died already.

—What evil people...

Abel sighed and continued to look out the window. Only the two moons illuminated the city with a shroud of soft light projecting from between the snow-white clouds. The streets, as cold a grave, showed no trace of lighting anywhere.

—This... the City Guard in which you work, Colonel, also does the police work? Can't you arrest those hooligans?

—Of course we arrest them, but their followers hide amongst the crowds. No matter how many we kill, they keep coming, like cockroaches.

—Seems like a hard job... Wow! What's that over there?

At the end of the street, they started travelling along the Danube's bank, which ran south to north along the city, and Abel gave a great sigh. On the river was a huge mass of light that illuminated the car brightly.

—Lanchid: The bridge that connects Buda and Pest. The only one in the city.

The huge mass of light was the enormous bridge, beautifully lit. The pillars, the size of small buildings, were decorated with statues, and the lights that lit them looked like a huge chain that crossed the bridge. Looking at the light on the water made one forget the winter's cold.

—Stop!

The car stopped at the entrance to the bridge. The official there was armed up to his eyeballs and had come out of the watch tower, from where light and automatic weapons pointed at them.

—It's me, Radcon. I'm taking a guest to Vérhegy.

—We know, Colonel.

The officer saluted him ceremoniously and made a gesture towards the tower. The hydraulic mechanism made a squeaky noise as it lifted the barrier.

—What strict vigilance...

With mild curiosity, Abel turned to look at the watch tower they had just left behind. It really did look like a fortress. Was that steel mass that could be seen in the tower's shadow, a bullet-proof car? It wasn't funny if they had to buy that kind of material.

—That's one of those new bullet-proof cars from the Germanic Kingdom, right? Aren't they very expensive?

—They're not that expensive. I think they cost half a million dinars.

—Hal..., half a million?!

His voice betrayed the priest.

With half a million, St. Matthias Cathedral could be reconstructed and there would still be money left over.

—That's many times over my worth ... But more than that...

—Abel had unconsciously started counting with his fingers, but he came back to his senses and lifted his head.

—Well, in short what I was thinking was that this surge in terrorism is all due the poverty of the citizens, right? So, instead of spending so much money in municipal budgets, wouldn't it be a better counterattack to invest in city funds?

—Ha, ha, ha! —Radcon just laughed at the priest's suggestion.

While they talked, the car had gotten close to the slope of a hill. From the top, bright light cut through the darkness. They shone a light almost as bright as if it were daylight.

—Is that hill Vérhegy? Where is the Marquis home?

—What are you talking about?

Radcon looked at the priest, who had been staring out the window with his face to the glass like a monkey at the zoo, with disdain.

—From Lanchid, everything is the Marquis' property... We've been crossing his property for a while now.

—Huh? The... then...the whole hill?

—Not only the hill. Everything on the side of Buda... Ah, we're here!

A small whimper escaped Abel's lips as he looked at the huge whitewashed walls that stood at the top of the hill.

The building, crowned with a baroque-styled dome, was a real palace.

On an extraordinarily huge terrain, were two large wings. Numerous fountains and bowers covered the garden. More than an actual place, it looked like

a fairy-tale castle. It was hard to imagine that this luxurious place could exist in the same city as the dark, gloomy streets of Pest he had just travelled through.

—Wow! Where there's money... there's money.

—The car parked and Abel got off, sighing.

—Can you tell His Excellency that we've brought Father Nightroad.

—Welcome, Father Nightroad. This way, if you please.

The maid that was waiting by the door said with a monotonous tone. Her bluish hair hid a beautiful face, yet it showed no life in it. She was a maiden devoid of artificial intelligence; build with the help of the lost technology from before the Armageddon: an automaton. Such things were usually only found in the houses of high ranking clerics of Rome or in the houses of wealthy kings and aristocrats. If they lived in a palace of that grandeur and they controlled the Guard as if they were a private army, the Kádár family must be very powerful. What a difference from the neighborhoods at the other side of the river.

—Well then Father, I'll take my leave.

Once Abel was inside the palace, Radcon said his goodbyes from the outside. Turning, the priest noticed that he was looking at him with the usual look, full of derision and pity.

—I'm sure you have many worries, but don't think about them anymore. In regards to the sister... she's a bit tight, but she's really hot. I'll take good care of her in your place.

—I appreciate the thought, but I'll be back soon, — said Abel, laughing in the same brainless manner as always.

—Besides, it's really late. I think I'll head back after dinner.

—Be back soon? Did you hear? He says he'll be back soon.

The giant laughed heartily, hitting the roof of the car, like if someone had said a joke. The driver and soldiers also laughed, but with a lot less enthusiasm.

—Unfortunately for you Father, the Marquis takes very good care of his guests... I don't think he'll let you go back. He makes a great effort so that everyone has a good time.

Laughing openly and impudently, Radcon got in the car. It turned back and made a mad dash down the slope, as if trying to get away from something. With the cape's collar up and a cold face, Abel saw as the car's red lights disappeared into the distance.

—This way, Father Nightroad.

The priest turned to the voice of the automaton that called out to him, and he followed her into the carpeted palace. Behind him, the doors closed noisily. The crystal spider was not lit. The only lighting was the moon's light that came in from the garden; yet, even in the dim light it was easy to tell that the room was as

big as a small house. Compared to Abel's cell in the cathedral, the room was like fifty times larger.

At the far end, there was a double door that opened up to a terrace facing the garden. On the right hand side was a large staircase that led to the library and a chess room. To the left ...

—Oooh, what beauty!

Looking at the painting that hanged on the wall to the left, Abel let out an enraptured sigh.

It was the painting of an aristocratic woman with wavy black hair. A teenager wearing a dress that bared her shoulders looked at Abel with soft blue eyes while she smiled slightly.

—It looks like an old portrait... I wonder who this is?

—My wife... She passed away some time ago.

When had he entered?

Turning around quickly, Abel met with the aristocrat, who was looking at him from the stairway. He was dressed in a jet black suit that seemed to reflect the darkness around him and vividly contrasted with his dark blue vest and sky-blue silk tie. Without a doubt, his clothes proved he was the lord and master of the place.

It almost seemed like darkness itself made way for this aristocrat. With a decadent arrogance, the Marquis Gyula descended the staircase with an extremely elegant pace and greeted Abel gracefully.

—Please forgive my impudence of such a short notice invitation. I'm sure you were surprised.

—Ah! Of...of course not. On contraire, I thank you for the invite.

—Please, have a seat. It might be too soon to call it a reunion, but let's toast to that.

Without his smile faltering, the Marquis snapped his fingers and a cart whose way was being lit by a butler carrying a cast iron candelabrum; It was being pushed by servants. They all showed the same lifeless expressions as the maid who had received the priest at the door had worn.

—So many automatons!

—That's because I'm not very fond of people. They are the ones that take care of me. Above all, the silence it's the best part.

The Marquis said, taking a white porcelain goblet the maid offered. He tasted the dingy red liquid that filled the cup and smiled, satisfied.

—Aaah! It's a passable flavor... Pour our guest a cup.

The wine was fragrant and flavorful, perfectly bitter and sweet.

—Delicious! What brand is this?

—Egri Bikavér... My winery makes it. It's very popular. It must be because we use a good fertilizer on the grapes.

—What kind of fertilizer?

From the darkness, the grey eyes stared at the priest, who had thirstily already drunk two cups.

—Blood... We add a lot of human blood—said the Marquis laughing as if he'd just told a great joke.

—What?!

Abel almost spat out the wine, but was able to control himself. Even so, he was unable to drink the liquid and let it sit inside his mouth.

—It's a joke, Father! You can rest easy. It's blood, but not human blood. It's ox's blood. We add a little blood from the oxen we sacrifice.

—Aaah, you had me scared there for a moment!—Whimpered Abel, his eyes wet with tears, after drinking the alcohol. Don't scare me like that, Marquis Gyula. I almost threw it up.

—Please accept my apologies. I didn't think you were going to take me so seriously.

The Marquis laughed quietly in the darkness at his guest's very comical reaction and took his own cup to his lips.

—But, it's strange—he said.

—What?

—Your reaction. Sauce with duck's blood, blood sausages... there are a lot of foods that have blood in them. But in the fertilizer? There is no reason to get so worked up about it, is there?

—But in those cases it is animal blood we're talking about ... It being human blood is completely different.

—Of course. Now that you mention it, it's also in the Bible, right?

*"I would turn my back to the person that consumes blood, and will exile him from his people."*

But if it's animal blood, there is no problem, right?

Laughing softly, the Marquis drank from his cup. The grey irises bustled briskly like the fog that settles on the river. Under that intelligent, but cold stare, Abel shifted uncomfortably, but he finally decided to speak frankly.

—There is something I want to ask you.

—What can it be?

—On the way over I got to see the streets of Pest. I was surprised to see them even more desolate than what I was told. On the other hand, Your Excellency lives a life of luxury ... You have not given thought to helping out the citizens more?

—For those vermin?



The Marquis laughed dryly, like if he had just heard a bad joke. His grey eyes were clearly filled with disdain.

I have to do something for that rabble? They are little more than cattle. They should be grateful I allow them to live.

—Cattle? That's not a nice way to speak about your fellow man. We are all human.

—We are all human? That *we* are all human?

The voice that reached from the shadows was of an infinite darkness. The bright stare pounced like a wolf on the priest's surprised eyes.

—Do not compare me to that rabble, Father —spat the slightly injured lips, with an infinite hatred.

—Do not compare me to that rabble.

—Sorry...

Abel scrunched his face at the Marquis sudden mood swing. As if in tune with the Lord's anger, a cold air that pierced the heart filled the room.

—Please forgive me. I might have gotten too worked up.

Clearing his throat, the Marquis' face returned to its natural state. With a fake smile, he looked at the painting on the wall.

—My wife would say the same thing. "*They are also human*". My wife spoiled the populace. On nights with a bright moon, like tonight, she would go into the city and give out treats to the citizens. I asked her to stop doing that.

Looking at his wife's portrait, the Marquis' eyes softened, like when someone talks about something very precious to them. But, as soon as he turned back to Abel, a cruel frost covered his eyes.

—One summer, the plague struck this region. The people in the city were dropping dead like flies. My wife, worried about them, went to give out medicine ... and never came back. They killed her.

—They killed her?

—Yes, the inhabitants of this city killed her.

Finishing his cup in one gulp, the Marquis sighed violently. His lips were stained red. Had Abel noticed that the pitcher he drank out of was different from before? The liquid that filled it was a strangely murky red.

—They are monsters... Dangerous monsters. Since then, I must protect myself. At any cost.

A little bell rang and the maids came into the room carrying trays. The table filled up with delicious-smelling foods. A large covered dish appeared before Abel.

—Your Excellency, what I was thinking was that...

While he mindlessly reached out to lift the lid, Abel continued talking, measuring his words with caution.

—I am very sorry for what happened to your wife, but to hate the whole city for it... Huh?

Abel felt the words get stuck in his throat as he lifted the lid. What was in the plate was something round. He stared at it for a few seconds without blinking. The rigid hairs, the deformation ...

It was a human head, covered in blood.

—Waaahhh!

You don't like it?

Abel dragged himself across the carpet trying desperately to run away; meanwhile cold, heartless eyes stared at him.

—It's one of the Partisans that attacked us today at the station ... A Terran that dared stand up to us Methuselah.

Those were the words they used to refer to the humans and to themselves, respectively.

Also, the aristocrat had referred to the city's populace as "cattle". That hadn't been a metaphor, it was meant literally...

—Your... Your Excellency...you're... It can't be —whimpered Abel unable to hide the chattering of his teeth.

—You're a vam... a vampire!

—I don't like that name.

The voice came from behind the priest. Turning around quickly, he found himself face to face with the aristocrat, who until a minute ago had been sitting in front of him.

—It's true that we take your blood, but being treated like monsters is a bit unpleasant... Anyway, let's forget that for now.

Being grabbed by the shoulders, an otherworldly scream escaped Abel's lips. A bloody breath had rested on his neck.

—I hate priests... They talk about infinite love, but have no qualms in hunting us down. Only because we are of another species, you even kill our wives and children. Who burned my wife at the stake, Father Nightroad, was a fanatic send by the Vatican, like you.

Two very sharp fangs appeared under the lips. The marquis grabbed him tightly. His eyes were filled with insatiable evil and hunger.

—Ah!

He didn't even have time to resist. With an almost elegant gesture, the marquis brought the priest closer to him. He shuddered when the lips neared his neck. The fangs pierced the white skin...

Just then, a loud noise, loud enough to destroy the eardrums, filled the room.

—What is going on?

The glass had shattered, and it had taken half a second before it lay scattered on the floor like snow. The automaton standing by the window went flying, pierced by an invisible lance.

Lifting his head quickly away from Abel's throat, the marquis turned towards the terrace and groaned. In his sharp eyes a fire burned. The flames caused by the explosion rose in one wing of the palace.

—Was it the powder keg?

Was it an accident? But some minor fireworks appeared near the site of the explosion. What was that?

Unexpectedly, screams and shots were heard, and as soon as the Marquis neared the window...

The doors that lead to the basement opened with a violent kick that was anything but elegant. From the other side of the doorway, behind the deformed doors that looked like an upside down V, a group of men with their faces covered with ski masks appeared. Seeing the weapons pointed at him, the marquis yelled...

—Partisans!

—Fire!

At the sound of the voice, a blaze erupted from the intruder's weapons. The automaton standing besides the marquis blew up in a thousand pieces, as if devoured by a swarm of bees. In the middle of the men was a small statured Partisan holding a crossbow, who yelled:

—Gyula! Ignore the bait! Hit Gyula!

—You are Csillag!

The chirr sound of an arrow going off towards the aristocrat was heard. The partisan had taken a shot. The arrow had flown off towards its prey's heart with a sound similar to the gnashing of teeth.

—Don't underestimate me, Terran!

The Marquis' form blurred like the reverberant summer air. Haste. That was the name of the special ability of the creatures of the night. They could multiply their reaction times many times over by stimulating their nervous system in an extraordinary manner. A dozen bullets flew by; grazing the aristocrats shadow in vain and the statue that had been right behind him had been converted to a pile of rubble. The arrow had been very nicely caught the between his fingers.

—I'm returning this to you!

The Marquis' mockery was accompanied by a monstrous scream. The arrow was buried in the chest of one of the Partisans. The flesh was melting, it stank and it smoked. It was the body's reaction to the silver nitrate in the arrow. Falling to the ground, the man violently twisted.

—¡Le... Lewis!

Csillag tried to go to his comrade, but a slender young man with brown eyes and an automatic pistol, stopped him. While he shot everywhere he yelled at him:

—No, Csillag! There is nothing you can do. Leave him. What's important right now is the priest...

—But Dietrich...

—Hurry!

Faced with his comrade's ruthless words, the small figure bit his lips, but took no time to make up his mind. He covered his face with the gas mask he carried on his head and he charged like a knight at a tournament, yelling:

—Everyone take cover!

Csillag began running like the wind. Running towards the vampire that awaited him, he quickly flipped the lower lever of the crossbow. The tense wire shot out an arrow with force towards the Marquis' heart.

—Csillag! Are you here to die? —barked the aristocrat, breaking the projectile he had stopped in midair with his bare hands.

Two dozen Terrans were no match for a Methuselah in a combat. That was plain as day. It was so obvious that the marquis paid no attention to the deadly arrow he was holding. He had not noticed the oddly bloated tip that was sparking. There was an explosion.

—What?!

The attack suffered by the Marquis was not critical. At most, the small explosion had blown off some fingers. For Methuselah, who could boast that they possessed the regenerative abilities of protozoa combined with the immune system of more complex animals, this was little more than a scratch that would heal over night. But given the size of the explosion, the smoke that filled the room was abnormal.

—Damn it, a smoke screen!

No matter how good a Methuselah's reflexes were, he could not avoid that. His vision went white and he felt a sharp pain in his nostrils. It wasn't simply a smoke screen; it was mixed with tear gas. The Methuselah's great sense of smell, superior to that of any living being, was used against him.

—Fuck! How dare you?! I will not forgive you for this, Csillag!

Making use of his haste, the Marquis looked around the room and saw a small figure that ran towards the terrace with the rest of the men, dragging the priest by his hands.

—Father Nightroad, This way! Hurry!

—Cough, cough, cough! What happ--? Ah!

Csillag came out pushing the priest, who wasn't too sure about what was going on. The fire caused by the powder keg's explosion illuminated the garden.

—This way, Csillag!

On a corner of the garden, standing next to a dry well, someone was signaling with a lamp. While helping Abel get up from between the grass Csillag whispered to him quickly.

—Can you run there, Father?

—I think so... But, Esther, how is it that you...?

—...

After a short silence, Csillag violently took off her gas mask, and her beautiful red hair blossomed through the night.

With bright eyes, the young lady asked Abel her voice tight:

—How long have you known, Father?

—When we spoke about the attack at the station you said : “It was a good thing that you came out unscathed.” How would you have known that?

—I talk too much...

Putting her hair up with her head bowed, Esther clicked her tongue. The Guard, who was getting back on its feet, could be heard clamoring.

—Hurry, the other squads have begun to retreat! —a nervous sounding voice called out from within the dry well.

Behind them, the smoke screen was clearing up. They really needed to get going.

—For now let’s go back to our hideout... Father, follow me closely so you won’t get lost.

## II

Under the lamp’s light, a group of men and woman danced dressed in colorful folkloric attire. Spinning around fast was the typical dance move of the region.

Accompanying the simple and upbeat music of the panpipe and the accordion, the faces of the men that clapped to the music’s rhythm were red like fire. Between laughter and cheers they passed the liquor bottles around and opened wine barrels. There was no shortage of food or drink in the city’s biggest tavern, and there wasn’t only alcohol and food. A crude mimeograph, a pile of pamphlets and various tools of obscure use were piled in a corner. Next to the winch was a homemade machine gun.

—Well, since they always spoke about the partisans, I thought that your bases were going to be located in the mountains. It’s surprising that there is a hiding place in the middle of the city.

—It’s because were in the city that they haven’t found us. Isn’t it said that the best place to hide a tree is in the forest? Here, Father.



Sighing with admiration at the group of dancers, the priest took the steaming cup that was being offered to him. Taking the sweet milk carefully, Abel thanked the girl sitting next to him.

—Thank you, Esther. Hmmm! It's good....

—I'm glad you like it. Since you said that you never wanted to see alcohol in your life, the kitchen made this for you quickly.

Looking at the priest, who looked so happy, his lips painted white, the red head novice happily laughed. Her laugh made her seem younger; she was only seventeen years old. Nobody would be able to see that cheerful carefree face and think she was actually Csillag; the dangerous criminal wanted for being the leader of a terrorist organization. Even Abel, who owed her his life due to her intervention a few hours back, looking at her innocent face, couldn't help but think that everything had been a joke.

—What's wrong, Father?

—Eh?

Realizing that he had been staring at her for some time, Abel quickly returned to reality. The lapis colored eyed looked at him, puzzled.

—Is there something on my face?

—Ah, no! It's nothing.

Shaking his head energetically, Abel started coughing, embarrassed. He tried to look serious, and changed the subject.

—By the way, Sister Esther, is it true you are the leader of the Partisans? You called it the Human Liberation Front of Istavan? Are you the one that leads them in the anti-government activities throughout the city?

—Well, yeah, it's like that. Bit calling me "leader" might be a bit too much. Esther tilted her head as if trying to find the right words.

Truth is that the only thing I do id unify the members; Provisions, financing, (basically donations from citizens), and things like that. Mr. Ignaz, the owner of this tavern, takes care of us; Dietrich is in charge of tactics... Dietrich, come here a minute.

From a group that was fervently discussing something; a young man came forward at the summons from the sister.

—What is it, Esther? Ah, Father Nightroad! Please forgive me for before. He threw back his brown hair and stretched his hand towards the priest.

—Long night, huh? I'm Dietrich von Lohengrin, it's a pleasure to meet you.

—Ah, same here!

Abel took the outstretched hand of Dietrich, who then took a seat next to Esther. His beauty was haunting. Judging by his name, he must be foreign, probably from the Germanic Kingdom. Even though he was a man, Abel felt a

shiver by being in presence of such a beautiful, delicate face. In order to shake that feeling off, Abel scrunched up his face.

—Are you cold, Father?

Esther looked at him worriedly and gave him a blanket.

—Esther, have you told the Father everything?

—We were talking about it... I think that Father Nightroad has realized that the ones running the city are them... the vampires. An ancient family that call themselves the Marquis' of Hungary.

Esther said the word “vampires” in an almost inaudible voice. Under the flickering light, a slight shadow of fear appeared on the novice's face.

—For outsiders, Istavan is a free city, but since hundreds of years it has been under the control of them. They own the industry, the banks, the agriculture...everything of worth. Besides, the city council is nothing more than accessories. And the City Guard is a bunch of dogs.

—And the citizens their food.

Dietrich cut her off, his face grim.

You saw the city's state, right Father? We are living in the limits. The Marquis of Hungary burdens the city with taxes and uses up all the money on the military. Those who cannot pay their taxes, The Guard takes them to jail; Nobody has ever heard of them again...

—But wait a minute, aren't you also responsible for the desolation of the city? Destroying public places, stealing food, killing...

—We only attack Guard posts!

Esther's voice rose uncharacteristically, as if hurt by Abel's words.

—We rescue prisoners; we take back the food taken away by The Guard to redistribute it... In those cases, we fight against The Guard and deaths result, but we have no other option ...

—Esther...

Dietrich placed his hand on the girl's shoulder, who seemed to have run out of steam, and stared coldly at Abel.

—Father, you call us killers, but what else can we do? Take it sitting down while we become food? The church has abandoned this city... What other option do we have than to get our hands dirty?!

—That the church has abandoned you? Then what is the bishop doing? If the vampires are acting up in great scale, denounce them to Rome and there will be a crusade...

—Father, you don't understand. —Dietrich said, shaking his head, as if he was pitying Abel's ignorance

Why do you think that the vampires have dominated this place for centuries? Do you know what sits east of this city, over the Carpathian Mountains?

—Of course, it's the Empire... —said Abel, lowering his head, embarrassed of his own carelessness.

The Empire, officially the True Human Empire, was a great military power situated east of Istavan. Its dominions extended from the Carpathians all the way to the Black Sea, occupying almost half of the entire eastern half of the habitable territories available for humans at the time. It was a rich state, with great technological power that could match the Vatican's power, who was humanities leader.

However, despite being a power, the country was shrouded in mystery. Who sat on the throne, what the many aristocrats thought ... This mystery wasn't strange, considering the True Human Empire was the last non-human state that remained on Earth. It had been founded by them, and up to the upper echelons of the empires, all of their aristocracy was made up of vampires.

—This city is the territory that separates the Vatican, who's on the west, from the Empire, who's on the east. It's the border between humanity and vampires. If the Vatican interfered, it would provoke the definite war between the species. Because of that, the Vatican has to treat the city with caution. Meaning, seeing the situation, they have to leave the citizens to their own devices.

—But whatever the Vatican does, these people were born and will die here... To protect themselves and everything they love, they have no other options but to fight.

Esther took in Dietrich words, her voice decisive. In her blue eyes, Abel thought he found the reason why the partisans followed her so loyally.

—Certainly, what we did today over at the palace did little more than to stir things up a bit, but for us it was a huge victory. That way, the city's inhabitants will know that they are not invincible, and that surely one day ...

—But it's a shame that we were unable to destroy *The Star of Sorrow*. We have to do something about it at all costs.

—*The Star of...* what is that?

— *The Star of Sorrow*. It's the ace up the Marquis' sleeve.—Said Dietrich, with a voice like that of the patient teacher speaking to his dumb student—. According to legend, it's one of the lost technologies from before the Armageddon. Actually, it is said that it was one of the weapons that brought about the Armageddon. —That brought about the Armageddon? So, what kind of weapon is it? A huge cannon?

—Unfortunately we don't know. There are many theories; that it's a force that creates a huge fireball that it can provoke earthquakes ... Whatever it is, the one that controls it is the Marquis of Hungary.

—Ah, that's terrible...! Huh? Wait a minute, if the Marquis owns such a powerful weapon, why hasn't he used it? If he were to burn up Rome, the Vatican would stop being an impediment for him, wouldn't it?

—It is said that in the wars of olden days, the weapon was completely destroyed, but lately there have been rumors circulating that the Marquis has restored it. According to our intel, as of late he's received powerful, expensive weapons of doubtful application from third parties.

—... So now that we're at this point, you must make a decision, Father.

With a cough, Esther interrupted Dietrich's speech and stared at the priest, her expression serious. The priest seemed distressed by all that he had just heard.

—While you remain in the city, you will be unable to escape the Marquis of Hungary. Precisely because of what happened tonight ... for your own good, we want you to join our cause. What do you think?

—What is clear to me is that after this I cannot return to the cathedral. I have no other choice but to remain with you for the rest of my life.

—Huh?! Ok, it's also no necessary for you to follow us forever...

—Oh Lord! My life has become a dead-end...Wahh! I've finished my milk. Do you mind if I go ask for another cup?

—Of course not. The kitchen is up those stairs.

Meanwhile Esther looked at the priest, who had gotten up from the table looking like he was about to cry, Dietrich whispered:

—I wonder if we're doing the right thing. Don't you think he might be a dead-weight?

—Even if he is, we can't just throw him away just like that, right? It's obvious he's going to be pretty useless to us, but... I'll look out after him for a while, don't you worry.

—But...

Dietrich started saying something, but looking at Esther's face he realized that his advice weren't going to make a difference. He shrugged; a forced smile on his face.

—You're too nice, but whatever, that's why I like you.

—Gee, why am I so unlucky?

While he waited for his milk to heat up, the tall priest continued to grumble. It seemed dawn was approaching, because on the other side of the window the world was slowly turning blue. It had been a long night. It seemed like it had lasted forty or fifty hours.

—And here I was thinking that I was going to be able to relax in the countryside after such a long time, and on the same day I arrive, this happens. I can't keep up. Oh Lord, why is my life so hard?!

—Isn't that always the case, Father Nightroad?

He suddenly heard a laid-back female voice trying to contain her laughter, where did it come from? In that kitchen there was no one else. However, Abel didn't seem surprised; he simply scratched his ear.

—Good Evening, Sister Kate... Actually, Good Morning. When did you get here?

—A few minutes ago. I was getting the report from Gunslinger. It seems that soon there is going to be a large military action lead by The Guard...Ah! And they are deploying bullet-proof cars beyond the city. Oh! Is that a combat car?

From the tavern's window, low, cheaply build houses could be seen, but no road. Where was the owner of the voice, and what was she seeing?

—Well, after the ruckus from before, I guess it's not too strange that the Guard is in an uproar... Poor Gunslinger, he'll be very busy.

—So, Sister Kate, what was in Gunslinger's report? What is the objective of the military action?

—We still don't know. At the moment, it seems like they've reinforced surveillance on the city's churches.

There was only one church in Istavan.

—Hmmm! So that means they'll start pressuring us soon?

—Cardinal Caterina believes it's best to get the church's officials out of the city, but if Rome were to act now, publicly, far from making things better, it would probably anger our enemies more.

—So then, the best thing would be to escape the city, right? Seems difficult...

—We should at least start preparing for it.

Taking the milk from the stove, which had started to boil, Abel remained quiet for a bit and nodded as if making up his mind.

—There is no other choice. I'll help out the partisans, and we'll figure something else. Like Gunslinger's report said, they are a very capable group.

—That's exactly who we wanted to talk to you about Abel...

The voice, which up that point had remained calm, became nervous.

—Truth is, there is a problem. In regards to tonight's raid ... Just before the attack, there was some suspicious movement by the Guard. They practically took out the entire munitions they had stored in the warehouse. It seems too be too timely for it to be a coincidence.

—So you're saying the information has been leaked from the Partisan side?



—Most likely. Thread carefully. I'll contact you later. Meanwhile, I'll remain vigilant here.

—Understood. You too, be careful, Iron Maiden.

After finishing his conversation with the invisible voice, Abel was thoughtful while he took the milk from the kettle. Maybe he'd have to talk some things over with Esther.

### III

Andrássy street, also called “The street of Heroes”, which crossed Pest east to west, was Istavan's main street. It was a street of great tradition. Since a long time ago, about 1,000 years before the Armageddon, when Istavan was the capital of the kingdom that ruled the region, the street had been the city's economic center. Even now, with the present state of desolation, on the refined building and convoluted street lamps you could see remnants of the old prosperity. Besides, since it was Sunday afternoon, it was filled with people going to the thrift stores or to buy food that came from the farms through the black market. No matter how much a city had declined, wherever there was a circulation of goods, there would be crowds.

—Hmmm! So this is the black market... For it being clandestine, it's very out in the open. Does the Guard not control it?

—It all depends on the bribes. There are even some stands that belong to Guard members ... For example, that stand selling second hand clothes. They sell Guard stuff there illegally.

—The trio walked around the crowds; the voice that whispered belonged to the young priest. The one with the brown hair was a very handsome young man. Half the people that crossed paths with him stared at him intently, the other half made it obvious to turn around and stare later.

—But if we are heading to the cathedral, there is no reason to cross this street, right, Dietrich? —whispered the bespectacled figure that accompanied the priest, as if speaking about delicate subject.

—Wouldn't it be safer to go through a less crowded street?

—Of course we stand out...especially me.

The bespectacled nun said embarrassed as she tucked her platinum hair into the cap. She was a very tall woman; she was easily 6'2. Shaking her head sadly, she kept complaining to the small nun who was besides her and whose stature contrasted hers.

—Waaah! I want to go back to Rome as soon as possible. How did I end up in this getup?

—No matter how much you whine, nothing will change. The Guard knows how you look Fa...I mean, Sister Avelina. Besides, it would look even stranger if we were to go to the cathedral as simple countrymen.

The petite nun, Esther, chastised the priest for his impatience in a low voice. Regardless of the seriousness in her voice, it was obvious that she was making a great effort not to burst out laughing.

—You look good in a habit... Pffft...!

—Huh? What do you mean ‘pffft’?

—Shhh! Quiet!

A group of patrolling officers were walking towards them. They walked along with their weapons on their shoulders and their heads thrown back. The nuns’ faces tensed, but the soldiers passed them by without a second look. After confirming that nothing was happening, the 3 of them quickly turned the corner.

—Be careful, Sister Avelina.

Abel turned to respond to Esther’s playful tone, but Dietrich raised his voice in a controlled tone:

—There’s the cathedral.







The trio quickened their pace towards the towering domes that contrasted against the blue sky. Without losing a beat, they crossed the threshold in a natural-looking gait.

—Your Grace!

—Esther!

They had come in at the time when the garden was cleaned. Seeing Esther, the faces of Bishop Vitez and the nuns lit up, so much so that for a moment they stopped what they were doing.

—What happened to you? Since you disappeared in the dead of night, we were all worried...

The bishop hugged Esther with sincere happiness, but as she lifted her gaze, her face scrunched up as if she's just seen a strange animal.

—Isn't that... Father Nightroad?

—Ah, hello...!

Looking at Abel, who was shaking his head like an abstract painting, and his appearance, one could only imagine the types of thoughts running through the bishop's head. Nonetheless, she stepped back as if trying to protect Esther from the strange nun. She said in a serious tone:

—Whatever it is, come on in and tell me what has happened.

After listening to Esther's advice and confession, Bishop Vitez's face remained calm. Cocking her head to one side, she sipped her tea.

—So then, Esther, what do you propose we do?

—Evacuate all personnel from the city, and do it soon. The Marquis of Hungary has attacked Father Nightroad, a member of the church. Besides, according to the father, he hates the church immensely. It's obvious his next target is the cathedral.

—Of course... but, up until now, the vampire has avoided touching this church. What brought about the sudden change?

—We don't know, but what we do know is that the situation has changed. This is no longer a safe place.

Esther's expression now was more serious than when she had confessed she was part of the partisans.

—Tomorrow morning a caravan will be leaving heading towards Vienna. Your Grace can go with them. We've already spoken to the merchants in charge of the caravan.

—Ok...but what are you going to do?

—Father Nightroad will help you leave the city.

—Don't try to change the subject, Esther —said the bishop, her voice clam, but underlined with the annoyance of not wanting to get the runaround any longer.

— I'm asking what are you going to be doing? You'll leave with us, won't you?

—... I was planning on staying. Everyone is staying. I can't just leave right now.

Esther's voice shook a bit, but judging from her stiff posture, it was obvious she had made up her mind. The bishop, who had been with her for 17 years, like an older sister, a mother, had nothing more to say. Abel nodded at a rhythmic pace.

—Ok. We'll heed your advice, but promise me something—said the bishop, biting her lip and placing a hand on Esther's cap as she stared into the lapis colored eyes.

— Don't put yourself into any more danger than necessary. Once everything is over with, I want to see you again, safe and sound...can you promise me that?

—Yes, Your Grace —nodded Esther. She made the sign of the cross as if promising it in the name of the Lord.

—Ok, right?

—If I may. Sorry to interrupt you, but we need to start preparing for the trip. With a cheerful laugh, Bishop Vitez turned towards Abel.

—This... Sister Avelina.

—Please, stop calling that.

—All right, Father Nighroad, then. You'll come with us, no?

—I would like to turn tail as soon as possible... —Abel sighed profusely, shrugging while still wearing a nun's habit.

— But I have some doubts regarding the partisans. I'll also stay.

—What are you saying, Father?

Esther stared at Abel's face, surprised. It was impossible to believe that someone like him had just said something like that.

—It's dangerous here! You need to leave with the bishop!

—Tonight, Dietrich and you risked yourselves in order to save me—the priest said calmly, his tone as carefree as always.

— I owe you one... and since I'm poor, I don't like owing debts.

—But, Father...

She needed to convince the priest otherwise, but he was being more stubborn than usual.

Esther looked over to Dietrich, like pleading for his help, but at that exact moment ...

—Your Grace! Oh god! Your Grace!

Someone was urgently knocking on the door.

Before Bishop Vitez could get up, the doors burst open and a figure came stumbling in.



—What's wrong, Brother Béla?

He was a middle aged monk that was beginning to show signs of male-pattern baldness. Panting, he went towards the bishop, who in the fuzz, had forgotten to reprimand him for his lack of manners.

—The Gu... Gu... The Guard!

—What?!

Before the monk could even finish what he was saying, a great fuzz could be heard along the corridors. The distinct sound of the military's boots joined the piercing screams and the breakage of glass. The priests that were trying to stop them were being beaten. Muffled screams were heard.

—We are looking for one of the terrorists that wreaked havoc on Vérhegy. Father Abel Nightroad. He's supposed to be at this church.

In the middle of all the noise, a strangely mechanical voice was heard.

—We've received information that he is hiding here, that's why we've come looking. We ask that you please collaborate. If not, you'll be considered traitors and we'll get rid of you.

—It's the Guard!

They couldn't have come at a worst possible time. Looking out from the door's key hole, Esther ground her teeth. The dark blue uniforms covered everything. Heading them was the youngster with the impassive face like a mask. Commander Tres Iqus, whom they had met at the station.

—Why now?!

—Esther, this way!

Bishop Vitez got up with an agility that belied her usual calm demeanor, as she pointed to the bookcase that covered the wall. At the far end was an ancient Bible, bound in leather. Pressing on the spine, which was as thick as a hand, the bookcase moved sideways with a thud. The bookcase had uncovered a narrow hole that barely allowed one person to go through it. It lead to a steep staircase that lost itself in the darkness.

—The previous bishop had this done. Hurry!

—But what about Your Grace? —Esther asked her, her voice sad, as the bishop pushed her from behind.

Bishop Vitez nodded with resolution.

—I can't leave by myself right now... like you said, I too am responsible for the lives of 30 clerics, so I'm staying here.

—No!

Maybe because the soldiers were in close proximity, but the bishop lowered her voice, even though her words were as hard as steel.

— You must fulfill your obligations... Father Nightroad, please look after this child.

—...

In Father Nightroad's eyes, who stared; pale, at bishop Vitez' beautiful face, for a moment a light flickered, as if wanting to say something, but instead he took Esther's hand and took her into the narrow pass.

—Let's go, Esther.

—Your Grace!

Even as Abel pulled her from her sleeve, Esther kept desperately looking at the one who had taken care of her since birth. There was no doubt that the fuzz was moving ever closer to the door, so the girl turned around quickly.

—Whatever it takes...I'll come back to save you!

They ran down the stairway into darkness. Surrounded by shadows, they only counted on the small lantern that Dietrich, who led them, was carrying. While they ran, the girl had by pulling her by the arm.

—Run, Esther... Lord, please protect my child.

Bishop Vitez saw as the trio disappeared into the darkness, her rosary tightly in her hand. She put the Bible back to its rightful place. The bookcase closed noisily just as the doors leading into the room were kicked open.

A sharp scream escaped the bishop's lips as she turned to face her victimizers.

—Stop this! This is the Lord's house!

We are working to maintain public order, Bishop Vitez. The particular objectives of the place where we are at are of no importance.

In the lead of the men that had barged into the room stood a young officer. He wasn't too tall, but his body was well proportionate, his dark blue uniform fitting him perfectly.

—I am commander Tres Iqus, of the special forces of the first regiment of the City Guard. We are looking for Abel Nightroad in this church. He's a suspect of terrorist attacks in Buda. Do you have any idea of this presumed terrorist's whereabouts?

—No, and even if I knew, I wouldn't tell you for anything in the world.

—We received intel that Father Nightroad was seen entering this church. If you are hiding him, not only you, but the whole church will be involved in this.

—It doesn't matter. I can't know what I don't know.

Iqus' arms disappeared for an instant, as if it were a mirage, and when they reappeared they were carrying a huge double barrel gun.

—I'll ask you again.

*Jericó M13 Dies Irae.* The officer, who was actually quite short, repeated the question, the biggest combat pistol in the world being pointed at the bishop's forehead.

—Are you saying that you do not know the whereabouts of the suspect?

—Yes.

—Understood.

The shot rumbled as if the atmosphere had been broken.

Even though only one shot was heard, there was smoke coming out of both barrels. The 13 millimeter bullets had ripped the bookcases to pieces as if they had been mere paper. It was needless to say that behind them was a hole that led to a hidden stairway.

—... Commence the persecution.

Ignoring the bishop, who was pale and remained with her eyes closed, Tres signaled the soldiers.

—If at all possible, try to capture him alive... If he resists, you can shoot to kill.

—What do we do with the woman, commander? —asked one of the soldiers, his rifle pointed at the bishop.

—Let's arrest her for obstruction of an officer. Surely Colonel Radcon will be happy.

—Negative. Who asked you to do anything? —Tres answered expressionless, pointing his still smoking gun towards the soldiers. His impassive eyes, like 2 crystal globes, fixated on the faces that paled.

—Our mission is to arrest Nightroad... Do not get sidetracked with frivolities. The Colonel told us to capture the priest, nothing more.

—No, we don't need to capture the priest, Commander Iqus.

A deep and hoarse voice interrupted them at the same time that a face like that of a piranha came brusquely into the picture.

—I can't allow you to go after the priest. Call back the troops immediately.

—There are some discrepancies between my orders and the orders you are giving me, Colonel. I demand an explanation.—said Tres, who has sheathed his gun instantly, as if magic. His voice was monotonous, like always, but it was obvious that he was not convinced about the sudden change of orders.

—I have been charged with capturing the priest. If we leave now in pursuit, there is no doubt that we will capture him.

—Let the priest go. Those are the Marquis' orders.

—The Marquis' order?

—It seems that Nightroad is an important piece. Let him go for now. Rather...

Ignoring Iqus, who had been shut up by the orders, Radcon turned towards Bishop Vitez. Looking at her hips with unbridled lust, he let out a breath that stank of nicotine.

—Laura Vitez, you are under arrest for obstruction of an officer and as a suspect of complicity in the escape of Nightroad. Commander Iqus, arrest all the church personnel that are here and take them to the Guard's central office. Then burn down the church. That is all.

—Message from Colonel Radcon. Our reconnaissance mission of Saint Matthias Cathedral has been completed.

The mechanical voice of the automaton did not reach the ears of the owner of such a vast room.

From the other side of the window, equipped with anti-UV ray glass, a part of Pest could be seen on the other bank. Looking the thin plume of smoke rising from between the tight blocks of buildings, the Marquis Gyula murmured to himself.

—Finally. Finally, we have begun...

How long had it been since he's lost his wife? Fifty years? Or one hundred? Even for the 300 years of average lifespan of a Methuselah, a hundred years of solitude was too much.

He felt a hunger in his heart.

Where there was supposed to be the object of his affection was nothing. It was a hunger that he'd be unable to satiate for all of eternity. No matter how much blood he drank, or how much he looked to for revenge, what he wanted most was never going to return.

Even so, the marquis wasn't going to stop looking for revenge just because of that. "*Revenge brings no satisfaction...*" What a stupid phrase. It was probably uttered by some idiot that had never loved.

Who expects a reward for revenge? Any avenger knows that their loved one will never return. Dirtying ones hands with blood only goes to show once more the love towards that person through the screams and terror of revenge.

—Sir, the equipment for transmission is ready.

In the face of the mechanical voice that called out to him once more, the marquis Gyula returned to reality from his disjointed thoughts. The automatons had prepared the equipment in the living room and was ready to transmit the voice of its master.

—Shall we begin?

The marquis turned one last time towards the wall.  
The smile on the woman in the painting was strangely sad.

—Esther! Are you ok?

—Mr. Ignaz, get everyone together! —shouted Esther, breathless, in front of the man that had just opened the basement door for them.

—It's an emergency! The Guard attacked the Cathedral...

—I know. They just announced it on the radio... That's why I was worried about you.

—On the radio? —Esther asked, her faced scrunched in surprise.

Ignaz pointed to a table surrounded by people with tense faces. They were listening to the muffled words off a transistor.

—Ou... determined that these are systematic destructive actions organized by the Vatican... rquis of Hungary... witness of... a priest, Abel Nightroad, who...

The subterranean room was calm, but the low volume and the interference made what was being said difficult to hear.

—Hey, they mentioned my name!

—The sound is not very good.

Someone turned up the volume due to Esther's comment. At first, the voice coming from the speaker seemed to merely be reciting the words in a calm tone, but when she was finally able to make out clear words, Esther's eyebrows rose.

—I repeat. I am Gyula Kádár, commander in chief of Istavan, Marquis of Hungary. This is a proclamation to all listeners. All lands in Istavan are property of the Marquis of Hungary. That is why, from today onwards I am declaring the city of Istavan under my direct control. In order to avoid pointless skirmishes that may arise due to these measures, I am closing down the city council and the courts. In its place I am declaring an indefinite martial law in the whole territory ...

—No... It can't be... to have them openly act, at this precise moment...

—Calm down, Esther. He's still talking... Besides, the enemy is already one step ahead of us.

A serene voice calmed a whimpering Esther down; it seemed as if she was about to faint. Looking up, she saw the lanky priest fixing his glasses with a strangely serious look on his face. After a short respite, just as the priest had said in an almost cold tone, the radio spit out the decisive words.

—We have confirmed that the culprit of the attacks that have been occurring around the city since yesterday is Father Nightroad, the chaplain from Saint Matthias Cathedral. That is why, in addition to commencing a resistance against The Vatican, -

who is the one responsible for ordering these attacks- the cathedral will be shut down indefinitely and all the clergy will be arrested ...

—What... what's that supposed to mean?!

Close down the cathedral? Arrest the clergy?

Murmuring in surprise, Esther realized the implication of the words from the radio but was unable to believe them.

They were openly declaring that they owned the city, they closed down the church, arrested the clergy, and accused Rome of organizing terrorist attacks. In short...

—No, it can't be, it's impossible...

The lightly trembling voice belonged to Dietrich, but just then, a voice that seemed to come from another planet resonated in everyone's ears.

—Incredible... The vampires want to start a war with the Vatican!

—My god! What is the meaning of all this?

A hoarse voice escaped from the lips of the beautiful woman clad in red, Cardinal Caterina Sforza.

Over the table floated a map of the Eastern border, filled with flickering red and white lights that represented the Vatican and Istavan.

—The Division of Infantry of the armored knights of St Stefan has been attacked by the armored vehicles of Istavan's Guard! Permission to respond!

—The transmissions of the patrolling balloons in sector four have been interrupted! There are signs that they have been broken!

—Message from the armored plane, *Ramiel*, which is on a patrolling mission! *"Detecting a non-identified flying object in our airspace in coordinates two-hundred nine dash zero thirty seven. Identified as combat airship Sárkány, from the military fleet Istavan's Guard. It is not answering our requests for communication. We are asking for instructions. We are asking for instructions."* End message.

—Imbeciles! Do the vampires in Istavan really think they can go up against the Vatican?

From within the calls of alarm from the officers, Francesco's hoarse voice appeared. His words were representative of the sentiments of the high ranking ecclesiastical officials who had gotten together at Sant'Angelo's castle late at night.

Since times immemorial, the Vatican had been the biggest and greatest authority in human society, or even the world. Lately, the growth of the secular states was hard to ignore, but up till that point nobody had had the guts to openly defy



Rome. They were nothinh more than a free, border city, what had possessed them to do something like that? Did they really believe that they could get away with proclaiming “*the domain of the Methuselah over the Terrans*”?

—How strong is the enemy?

—Two or three conventional infantry, about two to three thousand men. A mechanized battalion of armored and combat vehicles acquired from the Germanic Kingdom, and a mixed company of armored infantry and mechanized soldiers also acquired from the Germanic Kingdom. There are also their aerial forces; a destructor and two frigates ...

—If we’re talking about an opponent of such magnitude, the border patrol can adequately respond to the threat. It will not be necessary to send reinforcements.

—Oh! So those miserable vampires of Istavan have felt between a rock and a hard place and have fallen to despair.

Between the whispers shared amongst the cardinals, more forced laughs and bewilderment could be perceived than nervousness. From amongst them, a man with a fierce, deep roar stood up.

—Then, this is the ideal occasion! Francesco tapped forcefully on the table, his eyes blazing.

— Having them be the ones to declare war on us is perfect for us. That way we have a reason for an armored invasion. Let’s send knights and airplanes that are awaiting orders, and we’ll have them obliterated in 3 days!

—...

Listening to the voices that were agreeing with her half brother, Caterina was the only one to remain silent.

No matter how you looked at it, it was a very good opportunity. It was as if they were looking to give the Vatican a justified excuse to attack them. Even though the provocation was that direct, Caterina stood on the side of prudence, but it was probably impossible to oppose the dispatch of troops. If she tried to be the voice of reason at this moment the hawks would probably tear her apart.

*Could it be that the Marquis of Hungary was waiting for help from the Empire?*

No, that was imposible.

Without a doubt, the Empire was the biggest threat for humanity at the moment, but it had been centuries since they had fought with humans. It made no sense that they would fight against the Vatican over a border city.

That only left one possibility.

The infiltrated agents had said that the Marquis had an ace up his sleeve...

—*The Star of Sorrow*? If she had known that things were going to turn out like this, she would have ordered them to destroy it first.

It was still not clear what kind of weapon it was, but it was obvious that it had enough influence to cause the marquis to declare open hostility. It was too dangerous to let it be, but even if the operations to destroy it began then, would they get there in time?

—Sis...sister ...t...t...this...

Turning around rapidly, her face showing her annoyance at the muted voice that called out to her, she found herself face to face with her younger brother, who looked at her with eyes about to cry.

—This...this... What...what...do I have to do? If w...war...breaks out... would...would I...have to go?

—Don't worry Alec. You can be calm back in Rome. Nothing is going to happen.

Caterina faked a foolish smile for the Pope, who whimpered while he nervously moved his legs. At that moment, a priest from the Intelligence Office hurried in, pale, and transmitted the worst news of the night.

—The...the Cathedral of Saint Matthias in Istavan has been seized by the City Guard!

—What!

The faces of the cardinals changed color when they heard the news.

—It seems like they have burned it down after pillaging it! Starting with Bishop Vitez, all of the ecclesiastic personnel has been taken and there is fear for their lives.

## Chapter 3

# THE BETRAYING KNIGHT

Deadly arrow is their tongue, speaketh deceit in his mouth  
Peace talks with his friend, and within it lays its snares.

Jeremiah 9,8

### I

With a strangely loud noise, the orange Light spread over the snow clouds that covered the sky. Falling in the palace garden, the homemade rockets exploded with a deafening sound the tore through the early morning's sky.

—It seems like Dietrich has begun.

Esther remained absolutely immobile, looking to the other side of the river through the binoculars.

From the ruins of Pest, one could see what was going on the other side of the river as they pleased.

The bombs installed in the palace began exploding in a flashy manner. The Guard's soldiers were running around everywhere, their eyes still not quite awake. It seemed like the attack on the Marquis' palace had caught them off-guard. The series of explosions, all meticulously planned, like always, by Dietrich, made them run around like chickens without a head. Like a distraction, it was working magnificently.

With a mixture of satisfaction and nervousness, Esther focused her binoculars towards Pest's river bank. Imposing, brown buildings crowned by domes and surrounded by pinnacles that looked like a skeleton, and had once been the Parliament could be seen. In actually it was being used as the central office of the Guard. The major part of the troops was stationed at the border with the Vatican. Only the first regiment, under Radcon's command had stayed behind to protect the city. Honoring the reputation of being an elite team, their reaction was fast. Not even five minutes had gone by since the initial explosion, when the first armored vehicle left the premises headed towards the western part of the city.

—Let's go over the plan once more.

She had seen everything she needed to see. Esther set down the binoculars and turned to face the people that stood behind her.

The room was covered in a thick layer of dust that if someone had wanted, they could've written in it. A group of men and women very roughly armed, stared at Esther intently. It must have been at least a hundred of them. There were youngsters with babyish features to old men with white beards and pipes. Added to the group that Dietrich led in the distraction operation, those were the totality of the Partisan forces.

—We are here —said Esther, pointing to a place on the map hanging on the wall.

The old Museum of Applied Arts had been built before the Armageddon as the Museum of Crafts. Originally it was covered with tiles and beautiful forms made out of curves, but it had stood as a pile of rubble for a long time now. Since after the reconstruction that took place after the Armageddon, Pest's dimensions had been severely reduced, the zone, which had been a main street, became a desolate place.

But the Partisans had been using these ruined walls as their base of operations for a while now. Through the old metro tunnels which had been unused for centuries, they could travel to any point in the city without being noticed.

—If we follow the path of old route 8, we'll be 262 feet under the City Guard's base.

—Is that where their general headquarters are?

Esther nodded determinately at the words of the section chief.

—It's also where they keep political prisoners. Also, right this minute the vanguard team is making holes on their walls. Once the perforation is completed, the first platoon will go with me to free the clerics. The escape route of the prisoners is the responsibility of the 8<sup>th</sup> platoon, you, Imre. We have to get them out of the city at any cost.

—We'll take care of that.

The white haired old man smiled wickedly as he bit his pipe. All men, young and old nodded in agreement. Leaving the city, a mobile platoon would be waiting to take the clerics to the Vatican. For the Partisans, risking their lives to save Bishop Vitez's life was not merely out of sentimentalism. They had to prevent at all costs that she be used as a hostage against the Vatican.

—The rest of the platoons will use attacks to distract the enemy inside of headquarters. Make the most noise then fall back in order get the enemy's attention.

—The same menu as always, let's go.

Everyone started laughing at the comment. Esther had to really control herself so she wouldn't burst out laughing, but quickly came back to her senses and became serious again.

—Anyway, don't stay out in the open too long, it could be dangerous. It's very possible that the troops that we distracted towards the palace could return. It's six o'clock at the moment, the attack is programmed for six thirty...that means that by seven, no matter what the outcome of the operation, all platoons fall back. Is that clear?

—Yes!

Launching a war cry while brandishing their little homemade weapons, the Partisans went on the move. The leaders of each platoon called the names of their members and disappeared into the darkness of the tunnel in the order previously accorded.

—...

With a complicated expression on her face, a mixture of nervousness and uneasiness, Esther watched as the Partisans disappeared into the darkness exchanging comments in excited voices.

Her chest hurt.

How many Partisans would come back safe and sound?

She knew perfectly well that now was the time to fight. In the border, the Vatican's offensive had begun. Noting the inferiority of his forces, the Marquis of

Hungary surely intended to use the clergy as human shields. That meant that the fights would go on for longer and civilian blood would spill. Their attack would ensure that it wouldn't come to that. It was a fight to stop the fighting. What she was doing was the right thing.

Even though, her chest still hurt.

Happily following orders, a lot of her comrades headed towards certain death. Wasn't she a type of Valkyrie for them? Wasn't she the one that pushed them into a fight where they would die?

—Um... Sister Esther?

A feeble voice took her out of her reverie.

—The Guard's headquarters, how far are they? I hope is not too far. It's because I'm a city dweller and I'm not too used to walking.

The voice, which denoted no tension, made Esther forget her worries for a while. With a look of someone who had just remembered that she had something to do, she turned to the man standing behind her.

—In all due reality, I'd hope you'd stay here, Father.

—And I'll happily stay here too —said the priest, his tilted head almost touching the ceiling. His voice was ominous, and he seemed to be about to cry— but then, when I return to Rome after this, my career would be affected. They would say that I left my comrades behind and some such. The Vatican really cares about things like these.

—But... I'll tell you know: it will be very dangerous.

—I already know that, but either way, let me come with you. Can I? When we get there, I'll hide behind you.

—If there is no other choice —the young girl laughed at the priest's very frank request—. Follow me then. Thread lightly, don't get lost.

—Of course. I'll be quiet; don't you worry.



Seeing Abel's serious face, Esther really had to hold back the laughter. However, no matter how laughable the situation, it wasn't enough to make her completely forget the crushing pain that she had been experiencing since a while back.

—It's our turn, let's go!

The girl crossed herself nervously, and ordered the last platoon of ten men lead by Ignaz to proceed.

—May God be with us!

## II

—¿How are things over there?

—Everything in order. What is going on with the surface fights? Asked private Steindl to his partner who had come to relieve him, his gun on his shoulders.

In the underground facilities, which were an atomic shelter, the lights were on 24/7, but there seemed to be a problem with the air conditioner. The air was extremely cold. Steidl's breath was visible.

—It's only a matter of time. They are nothing more than a bunch of idiots. Their guerrilla tactics may work, but attacking openly...

—Idiot, I wasn't asking about that...but how much has the Vatican's army advanced.

Steindl lowered his voice, like if he was conspiring by simply talking about the subject. The Vatican had very quickly responded to the declaration of war from the day before. It seemed as if the troops were already prepared to cross the border in masse.

—The Vatican's army is the strongest in the world, isn't it? You think we'll survive this?

—Really, fighting against an enemy like that... Besides, I've heard that our boss is a monster.

—Shhh! Fool! Don't run your mouth!

Steindl reprimanded his companion, even though inside he thought the same thing.

He had arrived at Istavan half a year ago, running away from his home town where he was accused of theft, rape and murder. For an ex criminal like him, the Guard was like heaven. He had as much money and women as he liked, and when he felt tense, he could beat up any civilian. As long as he could make the best of the situation, he could care less if his boss was a monster or not, but the ex criminal never imagined that he'd be fighting against the Vatican. Especially not against the Vatican!

*"I'd better change my attitude soon."* Steindl remembered the money and jewelry that he had hidden at home.

—I'm here.

A very tall figure appeared in the hallway.

It was a very thin soldier. Few people could wear the uniform that badly. Poca gente habría a quien la sentara tan mal el uniforme. Dragging the sleeves of cape that was too big for him, he walked with bowed legs, giving off a very unmilitary vibe. Behind the glasses that were as thick as bottle's bottoms, friendly, icy-blue eyes shined.

—Ah, um, Hey! It's so cold, huh? Besides, it's winter. It gets really cold in winter

—Who the hell are you?

He didn't remember anyone like that in the Guard.

The lanky youth walked towards them lazily, his usual tense smile plastered on his face, as the two soldiers eyed him suspiciously.

—Stop right there! Why are you here?!

—Oh yeah! It's time for a shift change.

—Shift change? Stop saying stupid things, we just had a.... Hey, you!

Looking at the Young man once again, Steindl's tongue twisted. Thick glasses, light blue eyes... he's seen him before somewhere...

—It's that priest!

At the moment he tried to reach for his rifle, a sharp pain ran through Steindl's hands, making him scream. An arrow had deeply embedded itself in his palm. His partner was in the floor writhing in pain from, the projectile embedded in his thigh.

—Pa... Partisans!

The cape of the man with glasses moved to show a young girl under it. Steindl stared wide-eyed at the crossbow the girl carried.

—Where did you come from?

It was a very direct question, but unfortunately for him, he didn't hear the answer. The crossbow was fired and an arrow hit him right between the eyes. Even though the arrow was blunt so that it wouldn't kill anyone, Steindl's eyes went black and he fainted due to the impact of the heavy metal to his forehead.

—That's not fair, Esther! You had said that I could remain hidden the whole time!

—If you have a complaint, do it later. We're in a hurry now.

Coldly ignoring the priest's laments, Esther blew the commanding whistle at the same time she picked up the keys for the guards who were out cold. At the signal, the Partisans started appearing from the shadows. Esther threw the keys to an obese giant.

—Hurry, Ignaz! The bishop and the rest of the prisoners have to be around here!

At the end of the hallway screams and shots could be heard. The other platoon has started the fight. They had no time. They impatiently stuck the key into the keyhole, and once the door was half open everyone rushed inside.

—What darkness! Someone turn on the lights!

—Don't lower your guard! They might still have some watchers.

—Your Grace, we've come to rescue you!

The huge empty space was as big as a two story house. Since there was no light, it was impossible to see anything. The rails could be seen through the darkness. There was an odd smell that was unidentifiable as either blood or sweat, that rose from the floor all the way to the ceiling. However, there were no signs of a human presence.

—Your Grace! Where are you?

—I don't appreciate that you've come all the way here... —a deep male voice answered Esther's shouts. It was a calm voice, but one that reminded her of the strength of schnapps.

—Unfortunately Bishop Vitez is not here... Welcome all.

—What?!

The lights suddenly turned on and blinded the Partisans. To protect themselves from the blinding light, they all inadvertently gave a step back; the upper level filled with the dark shadows of men with weapons.

—The... the Guard!

Fifty Guard soldiers watched them, but what made the Partisans shiver with terror was not the dark blue uniforms.

In the middle of the men stood a young man that wore an Inverness coat; his hair was black and his eyes were grey and he called to mind the statues of ancient gods. Through his lips that bore an evil smile, two fangs protruded.

—Gyu... Gyu... Gyula Kádár! —screamed Esther, almost whimpering

—What are you doing here, Marquis of Hungary?

—Is it really that odd that I'd be here, Sister Esther?

Raising the corners of his lips, the marquis twisted his waist as if he'd just found a lady in a party and he was courteously saluting her.

—Yes, it's Gyula Kádár, Marquis of Hungary. Are you the infamous Csillag? What a surprise! The terrorist that has given us so many headaches is a beautiful young lady.

—Uh...

Without breaking eye contact with the vampire, who was smiling elegantly, Esther nodded, in despair.

*"We have failed!"*

Someone had leaked their attack plan. The bishop was not there. The operations had been a complete failure, and, even if they tried to escape by force, the difference in weaponry was huge...

—Let's surrender, Esther —a weak voice whispered to her from behind.

—Let's drop the weapons and let ourselves be taken in without violence.

—Don't say stupid things, Father! if they take use, then the bishop and the rest...

—Don't you get it? It's precisely because of that that we need to surrender—continued Abel, fixing his glasses and shaking his head. His voice and expression was very calm.

—If they haven't shot us yet is because they don't plan to kill us here, and if they want to take us alive, it means that they probably plan to use us as hostages along with the bishop and the rest. There's a high probability that they'll put us in the same cell as them.

—Of course...

Esther understood what Abel was trying to say without him needing to say any more. Either way, fighting would be equal to giving up any chance they had to win, and in those circumstances, it was impossible to rescue the bishop like that. It was better to surrender for the time being, and that way they'd keep the possibility of contacting the bishop later. Then, they could try to escape with more chances of success.

—You've defeated us, Marquis. —Esther said, her voice compliant, hoping that her comrades wouldn't start shooting in desperation. She threw down her crossbow and lowered her head.

—We surrender. Don't shoot.

—A commendable decision.

Laughing with satisfaction, from the upper level, the Marquis took a step into the void. His sense of equilibrium was so great that he fell 164 feet in a free fall, yet his hair was perfect.

Walking in long strides, like a carnivorous feline, the vampire went up to Esther and placed a finger on her chin.

—Seventeen or eighteen, huh? —murmured the Marquis, looking at the pale face with a mixture of hate and fear. His tone was light, but there was a mocking ring to it.

—I don't understand Terrans. Why do they sacrifice their lives when they are still so young? How is it that you are such a stupid species?

—It's not that I want to die. Simply...

The beautiful noble that stood in front of Esther was not human. With the simple movement from the fingernail he had placed on her chin, her head could go off flying in a trail of blood. Cold droplets slid down Esther's neck.

—There are times that one must risk life; it's that simple. For example, for family... Wouldn't you do the same, Marquis?

—Well, I don't have anyone to call family. Actually I don't know what to answer to that.

The Marquis answered in a bored tone and removed his nail from her chin. Bored, he looked at Able, who stood behind Esther.

—Ah! It's you, Father Nightroad. It hurt me that you left so soon yesterday. Did you not enjoy my attentions?

—I ask that you please forgive me for that.—greeted Abel in a measured tone.

—But, Your Excellency, you've been bad. You used me to bring out the Partisans, didn't you? And you blame the terrorist attacks on me and the Church.

—It saddens me that you say 'blame'. The Marquis smiled tensely, never negating Abel's accusations.

—Haven't you been sent by AX for the sole purpose of killing me, agent Abel Nightroad?

—Huh?!

Given the unexpected words of the Marquis, Esther's eyes moved towards Abel. The priest remained quiet, his expression hard.

—That doesn't matter right now. Where is the Bishop?—A Partisan who could no longer stand the tension shouted.

—Where have you taken her?

As if the Partisan's words had reminded him of the subject at hand, the Marquis's tone changed.

—Ah! Now that you mention it, there is something I want to give you, Sister Esther.

The Marquis took something out of his coat pocket. It was a rosary covered in dust and blood. Esther knew that rosary very well.

—It's....the Bishop's?!



The young woman's eyes were wide as plates as the marquis took her hand and placed the rosary there. Closing in on her ear, he whispered in a clear voice,

—We have killed her.

—...

Esther's body tensed up as if an electric current had ran through it.

What had that monster just said?

The news was so horrible that her brain was having trouble processing that information. He gasped for air two, three times but no air reached her lungs. Her brain wracked itself trying to interpret that information differently, but it failed miserably.

As if a lightning rod had reached her, the young woman stood frozen, her breaths ragged. The marquis said, his tone light:

—You were a little late, Sister Esther... Last night we killed her and the rest of the prisoners.

—...

The sound that surged put the hairs of everyone that heard it on edge. Almost at the same time that the noise reached the ears of the people present, the young woman drew out a silver blade she had on her waist and she stomped on the ground.





—No, Esther!

The first one to react was the bespectacled priest. He reached out his arm to try to hold Esther back... but he was too slow.

The knife's point hurled through the air straight towards the vampire's face, like an ominous wailing spirit announcing death.

—Hmmm!

A shrill metallic sound was heard as the knife collided with the Marquis' ring. The monstrous strength of the vampire was not only able to repeal the knife, but Esther too. However, if rage and hate were allowed to exist in raw form in this world, it was clear that they had been embodied in the body of the young woman that rolled around the floor like a cat. Twisting her delicate hands once more, the knife swung in the air as if by magic and went straight to the marquis' unprotected abdomen.

—Such dangerous objects should not be in the hands of young ladies...

The vampire's bitter laugh was heard at the same time as the girl's scream. Not only had he avoided the knife, but he had also caught the knife and Esther's hands while still laughing.

—Behave like a lady and stay put.

In a light tone, like if he was telling a joke, he threw Esther's body against the floor. If Abel had not gone to try and soften the blow, the girl would most likely have broken her neck. Both bodies rolled around on the floor, entwined and screaming.

—Esther!

The Partisans, who up to that point had been watching everything with their hands on their sides, took up their weapons and started shooting indiscriminately. The bullets that flew over the Marquis' head ended up hitting the walls behind him, a few centimeters from their comrades, who only lowered their heads instinctively.

—Stop shooting you imbeciles! You're going to hit your own comrades! —yelled Ignaz, yanking a rifle out of the hands of a young man.

—Attack face to face! This is a fight of life and death!

—Don't shoot! You might hit the Marquis. Use your bayonets! —yelled a Guard official on the upper level.

—Attack!

The white light bounced off the wall and ceiling. The partisans, armed with knives and axes, ran lunged towards the vampire, trying to save their leader. In order to stop them from being successful, the soldiers descended on them; brandishing their bayonets. The men crashed into each other in a rain of blood, screaming bloody murder.

—Go to Hell, Gyula!

With a loud scream, the Partisan from before brandished his rifle towards the aristocrat. Using the solid chestnut Wood as a club, he hit the marquis' head hard.

—Did we do it?!

A joyous shout went up amongst the Partisans. With a terrible hum, the wood had cleanly hit... the marquis' shadow.

—He's gone?

The butt of the rifle hit against the wall with a thud. Pieces of plaster went flying everywhere, and the attacker was forced to cover his face from the flying plaster.

—What a crude weapon! You thought you could kill me with this?

—What?!

Mockingly laughing at the young man, the marquis took the rifle out of his hands with a monstrous strength. Looking to see the figure that had just appeared besides him, the young man's face contorted.

A shadow. The Marquis had used haste. He smiled distractedly.

—You want it back?

El vampire twisted his wrists in an instant and the wet sound of torn up flesh, combined with the dry resonance of broken bones was heard. The rifle he had held in his hands had pierced the chest of his brave carrier. The barrel showed through his back like the point of a lance, pieces of his torn heart hanging from it. The young man's body went flying against the wall, where it stayed, embedded, like some kind of insect specimen.

—Heartless! —a voice said weakly, but nobody heard it because it was drowned out by the firing. Seeing the tragic end of his comrade, one of the Partisans had started shooting.

With a series of fires, a hail of bullets came out of the rifles cannons, but once more the marquis had used haste and they only hit the marquis' shadow. Actually, in this occasion not only did they only hit the shadow, but many of them bounced off the walls or hit the bodies of their comrades who had been on the other side, breaking some of the lamps on the ceiling.

—Esther! Esther! Wake up!

Amongst blood and wailing, Abel desperately shook Esther without receiving an answer. Had she hit her head when she fell?

—Father, take Esther away from here! —A figure with a huge belly shouted at him from amongst the bloodshed.

The plan has failed! We will cover you! Run and take Esther!

—Eh? Bu...but, Ignaz...

Abel was going to complain, but he bit his tongue. All around him, the few comrades left fell like flies. It was absolutely impossible for them to turn this around.

Taking Esther's unconscious body under his arm, Abel turned once more towards the giant..

—Thanks, Ignaz! I leave you in charge of everything!

—Don't worry, Father. Take Esther to a safe place, no matter what.

The lanky priest bit his tongue once more and ran out of there impetuously, with Esther under his left arm. Where were those skinny arms and legs getting their strength from? He was rushing so much that it seemed like he didn't notice the weight of the girl he was carrying, but next to him a figure that seemed to be going at the same speed as him appeared.

—Father Nighthead, do you really think that a simple Terran can run away from me just like that?

The grey eyes sharpened and an odd sound was heard.

An extremely sharp object tore through the air and attacked Abel. It was the Marquis' fist. On his back the bones shone in a horribly white fashion.

—Father!

It seemed like the edge had completely gone Abel. Noting the danger their leader was in, the Partisans brandished their guns, but the speed of the marquis was impossible to follow for a human. Like a mirage, everyone saw the blood sprout from the priest's heart as he fell.

—What?!

Yet, the one that had gone flying was the Marquis, even though it seemed like he had pierced the priest's heart with the edge. Instead of red blood, what sprouted was a white light and a hail of bullets.

When had that happened? The priest, who was running at full speed carried an ancient percussion revolver in his right hand. From the barrel white smoke was coming out, like the sharpened fangs of a hungry beast.

Avoiding the bullets with the reaction time of a creature of the night, the marquis landed on the wall and bared his fangs.

—You! Father Nighthead!

Before the Marquis could finish, Abel's right hand pressed the trigger.

—Bam!

Considering that he was running and carrying another person, his aim was impeccable. At the moment the Marquis activated his haste mode, two bullets grazed his hair. Judging by the whitish shine of the bullets, it was obvious that they were silver, the Methuselah's mortal enemy, along with UV rays. But no matter how silver the bullets were, they were useless if they couldn't hit their target. Besides, when using haste, there

was no creature in the world that could match a Methuselah. Through the seconds that advanced slowly, with a cruel calm the marquis took to the chase against the priest who was frozen like a statue.

—Ah!

In the next moment, the Marquis' body fell to the floor with a thud. From behind him, white smoke rose.

—You agent! You are nothing more than a vile Terran!

The Marquis shouted more out of rage than pain. The two bullets that he had dodged had hit the wall. Actually, they had destroyed the vapor tubing that controlled the heating of the place.

No matter that the Methuselah were the strongest creatures on Earth, a vapor shower was not something they could handle. That would give them some time to get away. Listening to the vampire's angry shouts behind him, Abel ran out of the hall, taking with him the girl and an empty gun.

### III

—Are you there?

—No, there is no one here... Where did they go?

The fluorescent lamps lit the way for the group of soldiers that walked by in a rush. The combat dogs growled deeply and sniffed everywhere. For them to be looking for two people, the deployment was huge, or was it that more Partisans had escaped?

—The second platoon, take block B. The first one, follow me. We are going to comb through the surrounding areas again.

Shouting in his signature deep voice, Radcon turned his huge body. He and his soldiers scanned the floor intently, but none looked up to the ventilation ducts that ran along the top part of the halls. That is why no one noticed the round glasses that spied on them from the vent's openings.

The glasses did not move from their spot for a good while, until the echoes of the boots had subsided. Once he'd made sure that there was nobody left, he slowly abandoned the inside of the duct. Sticking out half his body like a lizard, he skillfully entered a hole in the wall.

It was a very narrow hallway. Before the Armageddon when that place had been a bomb shelter, that hallway must've been for the maintenance of the electric installation. Careful not to hit his head against the fluorescent green ceiling, Abel stood up.

—And we're here! My body is all stiff. Had they captured all the rest? Or had someone been able to escape? It'd be best not to move from here until I see how the situation is going.



The temperature was almost below zero and he could see his breath. Despite everything, the lanky priest tried to cheer himself up and regain his strength. With the expression of someone sunbathing in spring, he said:

—Everything will be ok. Nobody will find us here. Sooner or later they will get tired of looking for us and then we can escape and meet up with our comrades. How does that sound?

—Are there even any comrades left?— the huddled girl asked, her voice and expression empty.

She had lost all her vitality. Her lapis eyes were fixated on the floor, like those of a beautiful doll that was only missing a heart. Her expressionless face seemed like it didn't even feel the cold.

—Certainly they've been trapped and killed... all of them... like the bishop and the rest...

—Don't say that, Esther —Abel reprimanded her, shaking his head as he placed the cape on her shoulders.

—There is no reason for them to have killed the prisoners, and it is possible that some of them escaped. Ah, Dietrich's team...!

—Stop trying to make me feel better! —screamed the girl, covering her ears with both hands.

—I drove them to this. If I had not... I killed the bishop!

—Even if we had not gotten ourselves involved with the Partisans, sooner or later the Marquis of Hungary would have attacked the church. He hated the church anyway...Neither the bishop's death nor the attack on the cathedral were your fault.

—But if I had been more careful and had gotten the bishop and the rest out of the city sooner...then...

—That was impossible. Don't you get it? Esther, you can't be feeling responsible for things that were out of your control. We don't have time for this. Now we have to think about what we are doing next.

—What we have to do?

There was no use in thinking about it in order to understand. Rescue the captures comrades. Save them before they suffered the same fate as Bishop Vitez, but how?!

—It's impossible, Father ... —said Esther, turning her head to look once more at the dusty floor.

—I don't have anyone left... It's impossible. I can't keep fighting.

—You don't have anyone left? Have you forgotten your most powerful ally?

—Eh?

Who else was left?

The girl turned, surprised, to look at the soft eyes that stared at her from behind the glasses. Puffing out his chest, Abel pointed to himself.

—I'm here. It's me. Aren't I your ally?

—...

Esther stared intently at Abel, who had adopted a dime novel pose, his nostrils flaring. Forgetting what she was going to say, she remained staring at the priest.

—...

—... So..., I'm a little embarrassed now.

Pfft!

A sigh escaped the lips of the girl. Her face turned red, so she lowered her head. Abel looked up to the ceiling, annoyed.

—What lack of manners! On top of the fact that I offered my help!

—It's...It's just that...that...

Esther was unable to say more. She was trying to hold back the laughter with little success. It was a laugh was typical of someone seventeen years of age. It was the first time that the priest had heard her laugh, so he stared, happy for her.

—Thank you, Father.

After laughing for a while, Esther dusted off her pants and stood. Her complexion was bad and she had bags under her eyes, like always, but the fire in her eyes had returned.

—Let's go... We need to get out of here somehow. If we wait for them to get tired of looking for us, their lives will be in danger.

—Hmm! That's true. Should we investigate this hallway a bit more? Maybe we'll get lucky and there's a connection straight to the metro's tunnel...

—If there is such a connection, it should be around here.

Exhaling white breath, Esther walked in front of Abel. The hallway was narrow and low and was full of complicated turns, but it was basically only one path so there was no risk of getting lost.

—By the way Father, there is something I want to ask you.— Esther said as they turned the corner, like if she had just remembered something.

—Before wasn't the right time to be asking questions, but...

—Yes, what is it?

—What is AX? And why were you called "agent"?

—Um...

The answer was not immediate. Esther couldn't be sure it was because the priest was trying not to hit himself against the ceiling or if there was another reason, so she repeated her question.

—The Marquis of Hungary said it before. He called you "agent"...What did he mean by that?

It wasn't that the question meant much to Esther, that's why the serious tone in which the voice answered her surprised her.

—Esther, actually I...There is something I need to tell you...

—Eh?

Esther stopped involuntarily and turned around. The grave, almost tormented face of the priest shocked her.

—Wh...What's wrong, Father Nightroad? Why such a serious expression?

—...

Abel didn't answer. Instead, his face looked like he was looking for the right answer all the while licking his lips. After the angel of silence had passed, he sighed.

—Esther, the truth is... I'm not a priest.

—What?

Esther did not understand the significance of that answer. If he wasn't a priest then what was he?

—Yes, I am not a priest. I'm...

—AX agent Abel Nightroad, code name "Krusnik". That is what he is.

The voice that had answered was not Abel's, nor Esther's, but a hateful growl that came from a corner.

—AX, the Secret Service of the Secretary of State of the Vatican. The Department of External Affairs. That man is an agent of Rome.

—Die... Dietrich!

Esther shouted when she saw who the figure that appeared staggering in the darkness was, but it was not the happy shout of someone meeting up with a comrade. She fell at his feet, pale.





—Dietrich! What happened to you? What is the reason for those wounds? Where are the others?

—We were soundly defeated... they have all been captured. Someone leaked the information.

Dietrich's hoarse voice sounded like it belonged on a ghost that haunted old battlegrounds. His beautiful face was pale like a cadaver's, his clothes torn and the gun he carried was covered in dust and blood.

But in the haggard face, the brown eyes stared at Abel with deep hatred. And it wasn't only the eyes, the gun was too.

—For the time being, take a seat, Dietrich. We need to clean those...

—Forget the wounds! We have to take care of this man!

The gun's barrel was not properly aiming at its target due to the shaky hand holding it, but it was clear that he was trying to pin something on him...

First when he casually left the Marquis' palace; then on our way to the Cathedral and we bumped into the Guard, it was as if they had been following us the whole time, and to top it off, today... Why did the Guard act as if they knew that we were coming? The answer in simple—Dietrich spit out with all his might, his eyes blazing with hate.

— That's because there is a traitor amongst us! Father Nightroad, you've been leaking information to the enemy! All so that the disturbances could be more violent!

—Dietrich, calm down...

—Yes, Dietrich, why does it have to have been Father Nightroad the one that did? It's true that he's an agent of whatchamacallit, but what prove is there that he...?

—Proof? Here is the proof!

Dietrich took Esther's hand and placed in it an envelope. The envelope's edges were burned, but it seemed that the letter inside was safe.

—I found this, this morning in Vérhegy. It was probably send to the Marquis by a spy.

The thin paper was not something new to Esther, who used to help Bishop Vitez with administrative duties. It was a standard document of the department in charge of the church's personnel, but what was written inside...

—Abel Nightroad. Date of Birth: Unknown. Height: Unknown. Weight: Unknown. History: Unknown...

The word "Unknown" filled the data column and at the end of the document, in the commentary section, was a single line that stood out.

—*"He's currently on an undercover mission in Istavan. Contact is impossible."* Wh...what is the meaning of this?

—Don't you get it, Esther? This man is a Vatican dog! Provoking the disturbances, what he was trying to do was give Rome a reason to invade! He wanted to use us, the Partisans, and the Cathedral as the flint to light the fire... Who was leaking the information to the Marquis was him!

—No...That's not true, Dietrich! You're wrong! —Abel shook his head, moving back a bit at the intent stare of both youths. He had gone pale, and his eyes darted nervously.

— Esther, that's not true!! I wanted to avoid fighting...

—Father... —Esther gasped, swallowing.

She didn't want to hear it. She didn't.

*"I'm your ally"* he had said. He had helped her in her darkest moment, but she had to ask...

—Father...answer me something —she said with a trembling voice that seemed to belong to a different person.

— Is it true that you are an agent of Rome? Are you really here on behalf of that AX organization?

—...

Abel looked sadly at Esther. In his eyes was such sadness that for a moment, Esther felt like she was the one who betrayed him, yet it was the priest who bowed his head. That action answered what Esther feared.

—Yes, I am not a priest. I am AX agent, Abel Nightroad, send on a special mission to this city by the Vatican.

—You've lied to us this whole time. You pretended to be a priest; acting dumb...You tricked us all, including the bishop...

*"If you shout, it's all over"*, the voice of reason was telling her from a corner of her mind, but Esther's voice continued on, as if the breaks had been released.

—You tricked us this whole time!



—No! Esther, it's not like that!

—I don't want to hear your excuses! Because of you, the Bishop...the Bishop...

—Shoot, Esther! Shoot him! Avenge them all! — Dietrich told her while he slid the gun into her hand and gave her a small pat on the back to encourage her.

—You're right, Esther. Shoot the killer of the Bishop!

—Huh?!

Something made Esther stop.

Something was off; there was something she wasn't getting.

*"The killer of the Bishop"...*but that...

—*"The killer of the Bishop"....* Dietrich, how do you know that the bishop is dead? —asked Esther in a slightly shaky voice without letting go of the gun she carried.

—Answer me. I've only just found out, but you weren't there...how do you know?

—...

The young man looked at Esther tiredly. She looked at him hoping to hear a convincing excuse come out of his lips.

But...

—Well, well... slightly clever girls are the worst.

The fatigue disappeared from his beautiful face as if by magic and he flexed his muscles. His voice, filled with a horrible vitality, seemed to belong to another person.

Esther looked at Dietrich like if she was seeing him for the first time. In his handsome face was a whirlwind of evil without end. What shined in his beautiful brown eyes was a glint of malevolence. Instinctively, Esther aimed the gun at him.

—Don't move or I'll shoot!

—You're going to shoot me? —Dietrich said in his fake friendly tone, like if she had said something funny.

—Go ahead... If you can, that is.

—Don't provoke me!

Esther pulled the trigger. She was only trying to intimidate him. She had aimed high.

But after the shot, a whimper was heard.

—Huh?!

She had hit him? How?

Before the girl, Abel moved away from her, his face contorting in pain while holding his right shoulder.

—E..., Esther...

—How?

Looking at the gun barrel and her hands, that followed the priest, Esther saw as her fingers moved at the same time she screamed.

A shot. This time it hit the left shoulder on the habit.

—What... was going on?

Confused, the girl tried to let go of the gun, but her fingers did not want to move and they kept holding on to the gun like they were glued to it.

—It's useless to resist, Esther. When I touched you before, I implanted a transmitter like this one—explained Dietrich, who had been looking at the girl's confusion, amused.

Something shined between her fingers. It was a thin cable. It was probably a few millimeters thick. If one looked at it closely, you could tell how the air moved it.

—This is one of the lost Technologies I've rebuild. It is made of a very particular organic fiber. If it is implanted on a person, it connects to their nervous system, and by sending a few electric signals...Like this, for example...

Another shot. Abel fell to the floor, a bullet having penetrated his thigh.

—Fa...Father! — Esther cried out, seeing her hands pull the trigger

— Father, Father! Nooo!

—What good voice... I let you free from the neck up, so you can scream all you want.— Dietrich told her, smiling. It seemed like he was listening to a concert by the angels.

—I've waited for a long time to hear that voice. A long, long time, but now that I've done it; I see that it is truly beautiful.

—Why? Why you...?

While her hands aimed towards the priest, who writhed in pain on the floor, Esther screamed, her voice hoarse. She wanted to reach out to him, to help his get up, but her body was not responding. Turning her head, that was the only thing she had control over, she looked at Dietrich.

—Why did you betray us? Why?

—Well, the first reason is business. The Marquis of Hungary is a client of mine.

The young man reached his hand towards the girl's cheeks, which were wet with the tears that flowed from the pain-filled eyes. Picking up the tears that fell like silver drops, he whispered into his beloved's ear.

—And another reason is... that I like you, Esther.

Licking the tears from his fingers, the beautiful devil laughed with an innocent face, like a flower opening.

—Isn't it normal to toy with the girl you like? That's because you are the stupidest girl I've met up till now. You aren't capable of doing anything, yet you are always spouting great things. Since birth you've been surrounded by people that love

you, and you never imagined that someone could hate you...Simply put, I wanted to have some fun at the expense of such a cheerful creature, nothing more.

—For that... you...?

Her body was completely frozen. She couldn't move a muscle. Activating the muscles in her face, the only thing she had control over, Esther looked at the beautiful monster with hatred.

—You betrayed us for that? You are a demon!

—Hmmm! Good phrase... but it seems to me that you don't realize the situation you're in.

—...

Opening her mouth, the girl let out a whimper. A burning pain had run through her nervous system. Being unable to fall, she let out a mute scream.

—The transmitter does not only control your movements. Touch, taste, pain..All your sensations are under my control.—Dietrich continued moving his finger with a bored expression.

—Well, then, what do you want me to do to you now? Do you want to suffer all the torments imaginable? I won't stop your heart. As long as you don't die of shock, how would the sensation of writhing in pain be? Or on the other hand, the sensation of pleasure... Wouldn't it be fun if you were taken by dozens of men at the same time? How long would your sanity last?

He placed his hand on the girl's shoulder, as if trying to increase her torment, and he turned dramatically, like if he had just remembered something, towards the priest that was on the ground.

—Aha! I have a more appropriate game for you.

—Stop!

Esther desperately tried to move her arms and gather her strength to stop the movement of her fingers, but her arm moved as if belonging to another person and aimed the gun at the priest's head. Her thin, index finger started pressing the hard steel of the trigger.

—No, nooo! — Esther implored, looking in abject horror as her own fingers pulled the trigger.

—Stop, please!

—Hmm! I think not.

Immediately after the cold refusal, a gunshot was heard.

## Chapter 4

# THE STAR OF SORROW

The light shines and the sun rose. Then the humble  
were exalted and they devoured the great.

Esther, prologue.

### I

—Don't look like that... It is almost over. In a bit everything will be over. We'll make all the ones we've captured pay what they owe you.

Whispering to the beautiful lady that smiled eternally in the portrait, the Marquis dropped a pill into his cup.

The blood pill that was the size of a fingernail fizzled. Once it was completely diluted, the wine's color changed from a light crimson to dark scarlet. After shaking it lightly, the aristocrat drank the contents of the cup in a gulp, his face showing disgust.

The Marquis knew that the liquid running through him would be absorbed by the capillaries in his abdomen. The irritation caused by the strange thirst disappeared like a lie and the red fog that covered his mind cleared itself cleanly.

Strictly speaking about tastes, fresh blood was not to his liking. It exuded a strong stench and it tasted plain, but the worst was the aftertaste it had. In terms of taste, it was much better to dissolve a blood pill in wine. If some spices and opium were added, all the better.

Even though it was always a pain.

The Methuselah lived on average more than 300 years, and had a vitality and immune system that nothing in the world could rival. They were almost perfect, but the thirst... Even now, they were still unable to rise above the congenital anemia that their species suffered. All the sudden decrease of red blood cells that they suffered periodically provoked the vampiric impulses that caused even the most iron-willed vampire to lose his mind. During those attacks, stopping a Methuselah was impossible. Especially for their ancestors, who had lived in a time where it was hard to obtain blood in capsules. Their only option to control that thirst was to suck blood. Taking that into consideration, it was not that odd that Terrans called Methuselah "vampires". That did not mean that they had to like that name, though.

The Marquis placed the empty cup down and crossed the room to go out to the terrace.

In the grey world seen through the anti-UV glasses, the sun was setting. At the same time that the white disk was sinking, the air darkened, like if someone was covering it with gauze. A white dot of light started to shine and the Second Moon that remained immobile in the southern skies started to lose its luminosity.

—With your permission, Dietrich von Lohengrin is here.

A young sounding voice resonated on the other side of the door that had opened silently.

—Your Excellency, I bring you Csillag.

—Welcome, Sister Esther.

Ignoring Dietrich, who bowed deeply, the Marquis went up to the small figure that stood next to him.

—Were you able to rest? Today has been a rough day, right?

—...

The girl, who wore a purple evening dress with pale violet brocade, responded to the host's greeting in a stubborn silence. Under the reddish hairs, her white face was of perfect proportions, but it was haggard and her cheeks were sunken in. With impeccable grace, the Marquis offered a seat to Esther, who nervously played with the rosary like if it was her last hope.

—Please take a seat, young lady. I ask that you please deign yourself to join me in my humble dinner... Dietrich, good job; you too, take a seat.

—Thank you very much.

Dietrich reacted by bowing. He took a chair out for Esther to sit, but the girl remained standing, like a porcelain doll. Dietrich placed a hand on her shoulder, as if he was trying to calm her down.

—¿How long are you going to be angry, Esther? Come, sit.

—...

Boring into the beautiful face, Esther reluctantly sat and as if they had been waiting for that, two automatons crossed the room pushing a cart. Before the two Terrans, hot plates of food were placed.

—Where is Father Nightroad?

The girl finally spoke as the automaton filled her cup with wine. Ignoring Dietrich, she asked the Marquis directly.

—Where is the Father? Where are my comrades?

—Everyone is safe —the Marquis answered with a magnanimous air, omitting the orders he had given Radcon. There was no need to ruin the evening by telling her the truth. Taking the cup filled with wine, he proposed a toast.

— Let's have a toast... It's a very uncouth dinner, but please, eat to your heart's content. At your age, Terrans are in... How do you say it? Growing age, right?

—This will be your end, Marquis of Hungary—Esther said harshly, ignoring the appetizing smell of the lamb soup in front of her.

— As much as I tolerated your dominion over this city until now, this time you've outdone yourself. Burning down the cathedral, killing all the clergy...The Vatican won't take that sitting down!

—Effectively. Their armies have already crossed the border. The Guard units are being beaten at the front. They are probably planning on entering Istavan tomorrow around this time.

—What...?

Esther blinked, staring at the Marquis, who spoke with the tone of someone discussing yesterday's weather.

If the Vatican armies were threatening him, why was the vampire sitting in front of her so nonchalant? Besides, Rome didn't know the fate of the clergy members. Had they began attacking without minding the hostages?

—Poor you...they've abandoned you.

A tranquil voice touched the girl's neck. Dietrich had stretched his hand to touch her.

—What the Vatican cares about is an excuse to attack. Our lives are of no importance to them... You haven't gotten it yet?

—Don't touch me, you traitor!

Taking the young man's hand off her like it was a filthy thing, Esther glared at him.

—You're despicable! Betraying us all and helping out a vampire...what shame!

—Vampire?

The marquis laughed at the Terran's conversation, but even though his lips laughed, his eyes were filled with a dark shadow.

"Vampire". That moniker was probably one of the biggest problems between the two species.

—Vampire, blood sucker, monster, damned demon...that's what you call us, but if that's how it is, what are you doing here?

—Eh?

—I'm asking you what are you doing here? —The marquis repeated with the same affable tone as always. The serenity of his words contrasted with the cruelty of what they were implying.

—If you're here is all because of that priest and Dietrich. Both of them have betrayed you. The Vatican abandoned this city and the cathedral to its luck. Is there a Methuselah, or how you say, a vampire amongst them?

—Bu...But that... —Esther panted, looking for the words to answer.



Men had used her and betrayed her. The Vatican had abandoned the Bishop and the rest. She desperately looked for words to defend them, but that was like trying to look for a grain of gold in the desert.

—It doesn't matter, that's your problem. Since it seems you're not very hungry, want me to show you something funny? Dietrich, begin the preparations.

—Yes, Your Excellency.

Laughing sardonically at the girl, that had stayed quiet with her head bowed, Dietrich snapped his fingers. The light in the room lost its luminosity and all around a veil of darkness appeared.

Even though it was a good time to try and escape, Esther remained seated, her mouth open, like if she was stupid. On the table, a pale shadow had appeared. They were images of a giant hologram.

—What is...?

In the beginning, Esther was incapable of distinguishing what the rectangular image showed since it was dark and blurry. Judging by the shape of a stain that looked like a ball of dust she realized it was a cloud. She was seeing images of the ground taken from above. Were they aerial images? But if the clouds looked so small, how high was the plane taking those pictures? Whether it was a plane or a space ship, it didn't seem easy to take pictures from that height.

—Hmmm! You can't see them very well.

In response to the Marquis' words, Dietrich moved the controllers that were in a corner of the table and a small keyboard appeared. His fingers danced above the keys like those of a pianist above his instrument, and the screen began to change.

The middle of the image grew, like if her eyes had gotten closer. Then, Esther finally realized that she was not looking at a photograph. The screen was filled with movement, from the clouds the danced in the air to the group of vehicles that ran on the surface. It was a live stream.

—That image is from about 125 miles from here. What you are seeing is the Guard's battle with the 6<sup>th</sup> Eastern Brigade of the Vatican's Army.— Dietrich said while he typed on the keyboard.

Numerous combat cars and armored vehicles crossed the smoking plain. Around them were small specks that surely corresponded to the infantry platoons. Two groups fought ferociously around a hill.

—If combat remains the same, by tomorrow they'd have reached Istavan. What speed!

—Surely they had these attacks planned out for a while now.

The Marquis laughed while watching Esther's confused expression out of the corner of his eye. In his laugh there was no sign of fear or resignation. It was

the unrivaled laugh of someone that was very sure of himself. Still smiling he asked Dietrich:

—Dietrich, where is The Star now?

—It's forty-four point five degrees North and thirty three point three degrees West..., approximately above Babylon, in Empire territory. We confirmed the recharge of energy forty seconds ago. In seven thousand and two seconds it will be ready to fire.

—Ah, Sister Esther! We aren't talking about you—The Marquis told the girl, who had instinctively turned when she heard the word "star".

—This is my *Star*, and it is not the "*Star of Hope*", which I think is the meaning of your name? It's *The Star of Sorrow*.

—*The Star of Sorrow*?

—Yes, *The Star of Sorrow*... my secret weapon. —the Marquis answered laughingly at the girl who kept repeating his words like a parrot.

— Pay close attention. For Rome, that city that you Terrans love so much, tonight will be its last night.

Since the Guard's movements were slow even as they retreated, General Humberto Barbarigo ordered his *arditi* to slow down their persecution.

—*Veni, vidi, vici* — the mature commander of the Vatican Army said as he looked at the battleground, repeating the words of the general of old.

It wasn't an exaggeration to say that the enemy was broken in a thousand pieces. In the distant plain covered by darkness, the pale lines of fire could be observed coming from the shots between the enemies in disarray and the grenadiers that chased them. Around the hill where they had set up post, the bodies in dark blue uniforms kept piling up, and the military materials had been abandoned.

The short hour the battle had been raging for had been completely dominated from beginning to end by Barbarigo and the troops he commanded: The 6<sup>th</sup> Eastern Brigade of the Vatican's Army, The Justinian.

The Guard could not compete with the Justinian in training, morale, or teamwork. There had been no need for the elite armored infantry to go into combat. The guys from the Department of Defense that had thought they could get new data from a real combat experience where sure to be disappointed.

—*Hic iacet pulvis, cinis et nihil...*-- Here lies the dust, ash, and nothing-- And we've only just watched—Commander Marco Antonio Braschi's mechanical voice complained weakly.

His squadron of golden knights, the 18th battalion of mechanized infantry, did not have to shoot a single shot. Rebuild using the best of the lost technologies and gifted with strength on par with vampires, the cyborg soldiers did not like to be left on the sidelines during a fight.

—Tomorrow we'll be in Istavan. If we have any fights with the Guard, we'll let you take them. You can perform all the deeds you want.

—We are looking forward to fighting... Can I ask you a question, general? Said the commander, raising one of his mechanical eyebrows at the words of Barbarigo. His artificial blue eyes shined in a corundum hue, reflecting the twilight sky.

—If we go into Istavan like that, there will inevitably be civilian deaths. Besides, the bishop and the rest of the ecclesiastic personnel are still being held as hostages.

—Don't you worry about the civilians. It's their fault if they get in the middle of the fight.

The Department of Defense had authorized combat within the city. Civilian death would be accepted without question up to 20%. They were so well prepared that the priests in charge of the funerals were already on their way.

—This is a holy war, commander. It is inevitable that there are sacrifices in the fight to get rid of vampires, the enemies of humanity, isn't that right?

—Then the Bishop and the rest will have the honor of becoming martyrs...

Braschi laughed merrily, balancing that gray rock of a body. Eighty percent of his body was mechanic, but it seemed he still kept his sense of humor, black humor, that's for sure.

—Well, it's about time to move headquarters. It will annoy me if Borghese beat us to it for taking things slowly.—said Barbarigo while he signaled the high officials and the battleground attendants that came near with his baton.

Compared to the position of the Justinian, who had invaded from the West under Barbarigo's command, the fifth brigade, Constantine, lead by Borghese and who had entered south, this one was higher north. Since the troops stationed in the south were even weaker than the ones in the west, the Constantine was most likely already on their way. More than the Guard soldiers, who were like toys, he was afraid that his comrades would steal the honor of victory.

—It's possible that there are still some enemy troops hidden. Wouldn't it be better to ask the areal patrol, Sandalphon, to do a scan?

—It's all the same. We are going to begin the invasion. Who's going to stop us? Barbarigo ordered, laughing at the caution of the man next to him.

—Ha, Ha, Ha... Not even God could stop us even if he were to appear right here...

—Eh?

Braschi cocked his head. It was as if something had caught his attention. He was looking far away, towards the south.

—What is wrong, Commander? Did you see an angel?

—The sensors reacted in an odd manner... There is disequilibrium in the density of the ions in the air.

—The density of the ions?

—How odd. It's like...but, so big...?

—Commander, can you explain it to us in terms we can understand? —Barbarigo asked irritated to the cyborg who kept turning his electronic eyes towards the sky.

—Ge... General! Look at that!

Barbarigo turned around at the words coming from the staff officer and his breath stopped, but he wasn't the only one. All the people that were around him had remained petrified staring at the southern sky.

In the night sky, as black as velvet, the Second Moon shined. On contraire of the First Moon that grew and shrank in 27-day cycles, the Second Moon shines continuously, day and night, all 365 days of the year, however, that night it's brightness seemed to pale. Between the moon and the planet a huge wall of scintillating light had emerged.

—Can it be an aurora borealis? Here?

*“Can it be a divine manifestation?”*

Or could it be the souls of the countless death that had gone to Heaven?

Forgetting what he had said before, Barbarigo crossed himself with his right hand.

—¿Is it a magnetic storm?

Braschi's hoarse electronic voice pierced the temples of the people present, who had remained paralyzed.

—Genaral, I'm perceiving a reaction of great energy... right above us!

Everyone instinctively looked up, and at that exact moment... the night sky exploded in flames that fell on them.

—The Fifth Brigade of the West, Constantine, has annihilated the third regimen of the Guard. The sixth brigade, Justinian is pursuing the second regimen of the Guard, one hundred and twenty-five miles west of Istavan.

—The mayor of Kalocsa, a satellite city of Istavan, has declared his neutral stance and is asking for protection from our troops.

—The battleship Nathaniel has received the bombing plan. It is requesting the estimation of the damages...

At the same time that the information was being made into sounds, the lights on the map were changing positions. The movements were so complex that it was

impossible to follow them, but it was obvious that the fight between the two forces was grossly unequal and that the end was close.

The Battle of Istavan, like it had been named by the Pope's private council, was coming to an end in only one day.

—Istavan will fall tomorrow —Francesco murmured, observing the lights of the hologram like a bird of prey.

After examining the details of the map, it seemed Caterina shared her brother's view.

—Completing operations seventy-two hours after declaring war is a magnificent job, brother.

The truth was that the operation directed by Francesco and the Department of Defense could be called almost artistic.

Firstly, at the same time that the attack began, mechanized soldiers had destroyed the Guard's communications centers around Istavan. When the Guard, confused, had tried to respond to the attack, their two best brigades of the Eastern Army, the fifth and sixth, had attacked from the south and west. The balance of force was already inclined in favor of the Vatican even before beginning the war, but once the Guard has been left in disarray after losing their communications, they had absolutely no way of winning. At that moment, the Constantine, on the south, and the Justinian on the West, moved along the deserted plains.

*"Truth was that it had been a brilliant operation".*

Was it because they had been training for this day for a while now? Or did Francesco really have that exceptional military ability, unmatched by anyone in the secular world? Even if he had not been born an illegitimate son of a Pope, he would have been able of creating an empire for himself.

—Here is a complete victory, Caterina.

His contained expression showed no intoxication of success. Looking at the eyes bright like sabers, Francesco continued as if sculpting the words, one by one.

—It's in the Bible: *"I commanded my sanctified ones; I also called my brave men to execute my rage, even them that rejoice in My Glory."* Whoever our enemies are, the secular states or the Empire, prestige is defended with force. In other words, if when attacked we hesitate in using the Lord's hammer, that only increases the danger.

Being representatives of God on Earth, we cannot allow ourselves to run away from challenges.

It couldn't be ignored that her brother was somewhat right.

*"But..."*

Behind the monocle, Caterina lowered her razor-like eyes.

There was something bothering her. Why had Istavan declared such a reckless attack? According to her agents, The Star of Sorrow, the ace up the Marquis' sleeve, when was he planning on using it?

—Your Eminence, we've received a message from the battleship supporting the Justinian.

—Transmit it.

The conversation between the operator and Francesco took Caterina out of her reverie. Looking up, she was met with a hologram of a middle-aged soldier saluting.

—I'm Captain Arnaldo di Cambi, from the *Sandalphon*. Your Eminence, the images from the ground are ready for retransmission.

—Thank you, Captain. Send me the data so that I can see the situation myself.

—Yes, sir! —the captain answered.

Next to him, a small blue window appeared. On the horizon which was starting to show the first signs of dawn, the smoke for the gunshots could be seen. On the top part of the screen, the Guard's Infantry ran away, pursuit by squadrons of combat cars.

—The Justinian is located 125 miles west of Istavan. Like you can see, the enemy is not putting up any resistance anymore. Even if we have to fight through a few pockets of resistance, we'll reach Istavan tomorrow.

—Ok, but don't let your guard down. We still have the vampire left, which is the most important part of this mission. We can't relax until we've annihilated him.

—I underst...

For an instant, the image of the captain blurred. The operator reached out to fix it when...

—!

The screen went white and made all the ecclesiastics that sat in the room of the Naia Sancta look away. The next instant, the image went completely black. It didn't last very long, but it was enough to blind the cardinals and the rest for a few minutes.

—Wha... what just happened? —Francesco who had turned away violently, shouted.

The operators rubbed their eyes, screaming, but it didn't seem like they knew what had happened either. Hitting the controls blindly, a voice screamed, confused.

—... nency! Your Eminency!

—What happened, captain? —Francesco asked. The screen remained completely black, but the whimpers of Di Cambi could be heard.

—The screen went out! What was that light?

—We...we don't know... All the optic sensors on the ship have been damaged.—The lightly trembling voice informed.

—But... but... you can see that... My God! What happened down there?

—Captain, calm down and continue your report! What has happened?—  
Caterina interrupted him. It was as if a bad feeling had grabbed her from the throat.

She didn't care about Francesco's dirty look. Had that been their secret weapon?

—I'm ordering you as a cardinal, Captain Di Cambi, report to us what has happened. Now!

—Ther... There are changes on the ground!

The voice continued to tremble. However, Captian Di Cambi's horrifying report was heard clearly.

—The...The Justinian and the Guard's troop they were fighting with have disappeared! It's not like they were destroyed. There is absolutely no sign of them! Nothing on the ground!

—Ah!

Esther was unable to speak until much later than when that blinding light had passed.

The plain that the hologram showed was completely burned. The thousands of soldiers that had just been there moments before had become a silent cloud of ash and dust.

Everything had died. Everything had been extinguished.

—That is *The Star of Sorrow*. My triumph... —the Marquis whispered, his expression complex, falling between satisfaction and sadness at all the destruction and death that had appeared in less than an instant.

*The Star of Sorrow*. It's a satellite equipped with the best of the lost technologies; It could fire a laser of free electrons. Turning at a low orbit of about thirteen thousand feet per second, it shoots a laser of twenty pulses per second. The total energy was of about 800 gigajoules, equivalent to the impact of a megaton bomb. Four of five of those rays were sufficient to reduce a city like Rome into rubble in a matter of seconds.

—...

Without blinking, the girl was absorbed by what was going on in the screen. She remained shaken for a while, until she managed to produce a shaky voice.

—Why?

—Eh?

The Marquis answered the girl's whisper sweetly. With her eyes filled to the brim with tears, Esther repeated her question.



—Why are you doing this? Was it not enough to kill the Bishop and the citizens of this city? Why do you have to kill so many people? Why such thirst for murder?

—It's not a thirst for murder. I don't have such bad taste that I'd enjoy carnage.

—Th... Then why? Why do you do it?

—To live. To survive.

—Live?

Esther's voice broke when she heard such an unexpected answer. Confused, she remained staring at the vampire that stood before her. The Marquis continued on patiently.

—Yes, to live. I'll ask you something, Esther. Why do you fight me? Why did the Partisans want me dead?

—Because it was our obligation.

Why was she talking with that damn monster?

She looked at the caller strangely, but she answered him seriously.

—You and your henchmen killed a lot of innocent people. The city was ravaged, the kids were dying of hunger, and the elders died of cold... We could not stay with our arms crossed. Even the most evil of people know that that killing is a sin, but I could not stay put, without doing anything. In order to survive, we...

The muffled sound of surprised reached the Marquis' ears.

—... And there is your answer.

The Marquis stood up, a slightly saddened smile playing on his lips. Outside, the veil of night had fallen. Opening the window that faced the terrace, the aristocrat stared at the girl.

—Let's suppose that the Methuselah fell prey to the Terrans...to the Vatican fanatics. Pierced through with silver needles and wooden stakes, we'd be begging for our lives.

*"Please stop this."*

*"I beg of you to spare the lives of my wife and children."* Would you stop? No, and you'd probably be right.

—Bu... but... but that...

—Listen, Sister Esther. Do not shut your ears. Don't close your eyes. This is fighting for life. Us and you, Methuselah and Terrans, vampires against humans...call it whatever you want. IT's about a fight for life; two species fighting for survival. It's a very simple war, really. You can only win or lose. Words like "coexistence" can only exist in the dreams of idiots. I know it perfectly well.

After finishing such a cold-blooded talk, he turned towards Dietrich, who had remained respectfully silent during the talk.

—The second shot. Prepare the second shot. The coordinates of the target are forty and a dash fifty and three degrees north, twelve dash twenty-seven degrees west. The center of Rome.

—Understood. A complete recharge will take about ten minutes —the young Terran informed him, his face expressionless.

Nodding vehemently, the Marquis turned to Esther once more.

—Ah, Sister! There is something I need to tell you... I've lied.

The Marquis knew that it would have been more compassionate of him to keep that information to himself, but at the same time he didn't feel it was fair to keep it from the brave girl.

It was strange that a Methuselah like him would have a sudden outburst of justice. In the end, wasn't that little girl a Terran? But without stopping to ponder on that, the Marquis told her the reality he had kept hidden.

—Your comrades captured this morning, The Partisans and that priest from the Vatican; they are no longer in this world. We have executed them.

## II

—Hurry, get off!

When Abel almost flew out of the car, it was already completely dark.

The far-away lights of the city shined coldly in the night. Since they had only bandaged the injuries on his shoulders, and had not gone beyond basic first aid, Abel had to really force himself to remain standing as he looked at his surroundings.

—Are we in... the aerodrome?

In his haziness he could blurrily make out a landing strip, a crude concrete control tower, and in the distance, he could make out reconnaissance biplanes parked. He also saw a huge combat airship that was travelling along, casting an evil black shadow aided by the light of the two moons. Since Istavan didn't have a civilian airport, this must be a military one, quite far Buda, but why had they taken them there?

—Well, well, what a funny coincidence to meet here again, Father.—said a rude and hoarse voice from the distance.

Turning, Abel met someone he'd hoped to never see again; a smiling fish-face that approached from the control tower. Behind Radcon were about a hundred men and women that were being pushed around by Guard soldiers. They were all handcuffed, clamps on their feet, their clothes torn to pieces, and most of them were injured.

Hurry, stand behind that line, you shitty Partisans! Hey priest, you too, imbecile! —Radcon shouted, pushing the prisoners towards a white line drawn on the floor on one side of the landing straight. He held the small lever crossbow that Esther had used.

— We'll begin your trial summarily. I'll be the judge. The prosecutor will also be me. Oh, and there's no lawyers.

Before taking them there, they were probably tortured. Without strength, the Partisans remained mute, standing on the frosty ground. Abel tried resisting on their behalf with weak voice.

—If this is a trial, what are we being charged with?

—Of killing, robbing, blackmailing, causing fires, and rebellion against the city of Istavan. The verdict is... the death penalty!

The soldiers that were watching the exchange of words burst out in crude laughs and they started whistling and throwing out obscenities at the prisoners. The Partisans could do nothing more than whimper weakly.

—The truth is that I would love to beat the crap out of you until you died, like I did with the Bishop and the rest, but unfortunately, we don't have time for that right now. You'll be executed with...that.

With a stroke of the chin, Radcon signaled the black airship that was overflying the aerodrome. Under the huge globes, huge machine guns lined up. Radcon made a signal with his arms and a blinking light signaled back from the airship's bridge.

—This is the battleship, *Sárkány*, the pride and joy of our army. You guys are going to serve as target practice. Of course, you can try to avoid the shots, but it will not be easy on the landing strip. You are forbidden to cross the white line. We will shoot down anyone who does not follow that rule.

Under the huge eyelids, Radcon's eyes were filled of a hungry light. He smirked, turning the crossbow in his hands like if he was playing with a toy he didn't like.

—I hope you will entertain us to the max, Father. Like your buddies did yesterday.

—We're you the one that killed the clergy, Colonel?

—Ha, ha, ha, it was so much fun. We cut off their hands and feet and fed them to the dogs. We raped the nuns while we were cutting them up. No matter how holy they pretend to be, they are just normal women like the rest... Vitez was especially hot. She was great. We took turns, all thirty of us and we had a great time.

—...

Abel bit his lips until they went white. He bowed his silver-haired head as if trying to control his anger. Radcon observed him, satisfied of how his shoulders trembled in rage. The colonel was in a good mood.

—We also wanted to play with you a bit too, but we're so busy right now... Don't take it the wrong way. Come on; let's get this show on the road.

—You have not commenced, Coronel?

The monotonous voice at his back was like a bucket of cold water for Radcon, who turned around angrily.

—Where the hell were you, Commander Iqus?  
—I was doing an inspection round... The Marquis has ordered a check of the anti-aircraft cannons of the aerodrome. I came now to see the execution.— said Commander Tres Iqus, without even flinching under Radcon's hate-filled stare.

The young officer approached with a heavy step and made a sign with his head, his cloak's sleeves flapping around without showing any signs that he felt the cold.

—It's been over an hour since we got the order for the execution. Why the hold up?

—Don't be such a drag. Besides, if we have nothing to do, we can very well enjoy ourselves a little.—said Radcon, turning away.

“*What an annoying guy*” Radcon thought to himself and his expression was like that of a bulldog that had had a piece of meat taken away from him from right under his nose.

—¡Come on, let's finish this! Send the orders to start to the *Sárkany*!  
At the surly command typical of his superior, the soldier hurriedly pressed the button of the wireless radio that he carried on his back. He barked some orders into the microphone and as a respond, the sound of the airship's motors augmented.

—Run you shitty Partisans, try to run away! If you stay put, it will be too easy and it won't work as practice.— Radcon shouted rudely at the same time he triggered the crossbow.

The arrow landed right in front of Abel; like if that had been a signal, the Gatling guns on the airship began moving like a nest of snakes sticking their heads out. Maybe they became scared of the unpredictable movements, but the Partisans who up to that moment had been looking up at the sky, their energy depleted, gathered strength from who knows where and started running.

—Ha, ha, ha! Run, run, you losers!

Radcon's laugh did not reach anyone's ears because at that exact moment the airship's machine guns opened fire.

The shots, roaring like an evil dragon, created a dust storm. Grazing the line of Partisans that were running away, dozens of bullets pierced the frozen ground.

—Heh, the people on the *Sárkany* want to get in on the fun too! —Radcon laughed again, looking up at the airship.

The Partisans ran around like chickens without heads, without showing any signs of retaliation. Moving around blindly, kicking and pushing, they thought of nothing more than to escape death. The machine guns pointed their dark muzzles towards the line of Partisans.

—Snap out of it, Ignaz! Stand up!

At the end of the line stood the lanky priest and the giant, which had fallen to the ground after being grazed by a bullet. Ignaz tried to stand up by leaning against Abel's shoulder, but in the confusion, he was barely able to move his body.

—Typical of a priest... Tell them to aim well and kill—Radcon said, licking his lips as he looked through the binoculars so he wouldn't miss the moment of impact.

Once again a loud sound was heard and the ground shattered in a million pieces. The line of bullets that travelled on one side of the landing strip towards the priest looked like a shark fin aiming for its prey.

—Yes!

Grabbing the giant, the priest tried running from the barrage of bullets that neared him, but it was impossible. Seeing the two men being engulfed by a cloud of dust, Radcon and the soldiers let out a shout of joy, but then...

Everything was suddenly lit up.

—Wha... what just happened?

Lifting his head, a huge blinding ball of light hit his eyes. Just as they realized that the flames were coming out of the side of the *Sárkany*, a second explosion cut across the helium globe and pierced the airship's cabin.

—The... The *Sárkany*!

The ship split in half with a loud noise and plummeted to the ground, turned into a column of fire along the night sky. The fall lasted a lifetime. When it finally hit the ground against a small hill next to the aerodrome, it exploded once more, loudly.

—What... What has happened? But, what...? T... that...!

Raising his sharp eyes towards the sky, Radcon's voice betrayed him.

—A...a battleship?

A white shadow was coming down at great velocity, like a warrior maiden on her way to a battle. It was an incredibly huge airship. Made up of elegant curves, it was the most beautiful and refined airship Radcon had ever seen. Painted over the white, a blood-red Roman cross and the words "Arcanum cella ex dono dei" could be seen.

—The Vatican! A Vatican battleship!

This is the Iron Maiden II, from the AX agency of the Secretary of State of the Vatican—a female voice began saying through the racket.

—Speaking from the Iron Maiden II, belonging to the AX agency of the Secretary of State of the Vatican, I am Sister Kate, captain of this ship. This is a warning to the soldiers of the Guard of Istavan. This aerodrome is now under our command. Drop your weapons immediately and surrender. I repeat, drop your weapons!

The voice was pleasant, but the message was not. To show that it wasn't just an empty threat, the ship's cannon opened fire. A ruby-red flare cut across the night sky and the biplanes parked on the landing strip exploded into a thousand pieces like if they had been made out of paper. .

—Wha...what the hell is the antiaircraft artillery doing?

Why hadn't such a bug ship appeared on their radars as it approached?

Confused by suspicions, rage and fears, Radcon grabbed the soldier with the radio who was trying to run away by the collar and yelled at him, exasperated.

—What is the antiaircraft artillery doing? Have them shoot down that monster now!

—It's useless Colonel—a cold voice interrupted him.

—They've been annihilated... There is no one left alive.

—Stop saying stupid shit, Iqus! The antiaircraft artillery is perfectly...!

A thin column of smoke rose from the control tower. Radcon shouted as he pointed with the crossbow towards that direction, but suddenly his voice broke, like if someone had grabbed him from the neck.

What had that guy said before?

*"A check up of the antiaircraft cannons in the aerodrome."* Hadn't he said something like that??

—Commander Iqus, you... It's impossible...

—The Partisans! Capture the Partisans as hostages!

The soldiers moved hurriedly around de Radcon, who had become paralyzed in his spot. They had probably realized that in such open air place like the one they were in, the only option they had was to use human shields to protect themselves. One neared Abel, who was on the floor, and tried to get him up by the hair.

—Don't resist, Father! You are my prisone...!

The soldier suddenly fell over. Instead of words, fresh red blood started flowing out of his mouth. He looked at himself, surprised.

—Eh?

A hole the size of a fist had pierced his chest, but he didn't know if it had been a shot. When he fell to the ground, covered in blood, he was already a cadaver.

—Didn't they tell you to surrender? —the man holding a huge gun in both hands said in his typical monotonous voice. He had just killed a comrade, but his face remained unfazed.

—Commander Iqus, you... you...

—You're zero point forty-four seconds too late.

Without looking away, Iqus brandished the gun, and the sound of an explosion was heard. Being unable to shoot the crossbow, Radcon fell to the floor, holding his stomach.

—Initiating genocide combat mode. Begin attack.

At the same time that they heard their death sentence and before realizing what was going on, four soldiers went flying in a thousand bloody pieces that had once been their torso. The arm of an officer, who had tried to shoot his weapon, fell to the floor, cleanly cut off by the bullets.

—Co...Commander Iqus! Are you seriously going to betray us?

—Negative. I was never one of you.

—What are you saying? Then, you...

The officer was going to shout something, but the bullets pierced his palate and perforating the spine nicely. The headless body fell in a puddle of blood filled with chunks of brain.

—I recommend that you surrender.— Tres said, looking at the few surviving soldiers from the corner of his eyes, as he took out the empty cartridges.

—You perpetrated the attack on St. Matthias Cathedral. You will have to testify at Sant'Angelo Castle. If you surrender, you'll live.

—Sant'Angelo Castle... You're a Vatican dog!

—Watch out, Tres! —Abel, who was stunned, watching the scene unfold.

A shadow appeared behind Tres. It was Radcon. The mechanized giant, who had withstood a shot from close range, carried the machine gun of a fallen soldier. He charged at Tres, who besides the fact that he hadn't seen him, also had his guns empty, from behind.

—Go to hell, Iqus!

The series of shots sounded like a tissue that was ripping and it enveloped Tres who had just turned, in a smoke cloud. The automatic discharge of dozens of bullets had gotten him point-blanc. A cloud of dust rose up and a strong current of wind made the shredded uniform flow.

—Ha! That's what you get, you traitor! —Radcon shouted, his mouth bloodied, after discharging the whole cartridge. He walked towards the dust cloud that had surrounded Tres, spitting spitefully.

—Or did you seriously think that I'd allow myself to be killed by a Vatican dog?!

—Negative. Colonel Radcon, I wasn't planning on killing you. We'll take you alive back to Rome.—a voice talked from within the dust and smoke, cold like steel.

Radcon opened his eyes so much that they seemed like they were going to jump out of his sockets. The night breeze dispersed the dust cloud and showed a figure amongst it. The cape, pierced by dozens of bullets, was torn to bits, and the floor, littered with bullet holes, looked like it was the very gates of Hell.





Yet, the man remained standing, forming across with his arms to cover his face, like if he didn't know death.

—No...it can't be! —Radcon said while he retreated instinctively.

— This one is not human...

—Not human? Positive. It's true, I am not human. —Iqus said, uncrossing his arms, like nothing had happened.

Despite the barrage of bullets he had received, there was not one drop of blood on his body. The bullets had caused some scratches on his artificial skin made up of macromolecules, but they had been unable to pierce the plastic muscles with thermal effect and had simply remained squished on his body.

The young officer, or better yet, the killing machine that pretended to be a young officer presented himself in a monotonous voice.

—I am agent HC - III X, from the AX agency of the Secretaty of State of the Vatican State. Codename: Gunslinger. And I am not human. I am a machine.

—Shiiiiit! —a fierce roar was heard.

Bending forward, Radcon threw himself on Tres in such a way that the ground rumbled. The assault by the bionic soldier had as much strength as that of an armored vehicle.

—Die, you damn doll!

—Zero point twenty-five too late.— Tres said in a cold voice, as he watched a fist capable of pulverizing stone approach him.

His sleeves moved slightly, and the sound a spring was heard and a charger flew toward the butt of the M13 that Tres was holding with both hands. Stepping back a step, he dodged the fist that passed him with a hiss capable of destroying temples. Tres aimed the cannons once more towards the giant that was trying to regain his balance.

—!

Eight shots were heard, and blood spurted out of Radcon's extremities.

Elbow, shoulder, knee, waist... Hitting his vital joints, the bionic giant fell to the floor like a marionette that had had his strings cut off.

—You...you...

—I think you have already said that. I don't want to kill you, Colonel Radcon —said the killing machine, a cold glint in his crystal eyes. To Radcon, who was unable to even stand up, a fate even worse than death awaited him.

— I won't kill you here. They've already prepared a cell for your interrogation over at Sant'Angelo Castle. They will ask you about everything that you have been doing up until now... Taking into consideration your corpulence, I think it'll take you a long time to die.

Ignoring the bionic soldier, who had quickly gone pale, Tres turned to Abel.

—All clear... Damage report, Father Nightroad.

—You've finally interfered... Took you long enough, Tres —whimpered Abel, looking up at the man who dominated the battlefield.

—I was worried about when you were going act.

—Negative. You have deviated yourself from the program too much. I have been following the original plan. Well, that...

—I'm sorry to inform you that we have confirmation of a shot by *The Star of Sorrow* that happened two-hundred seconds ago... —Sister Kate's tense voice was heard through the receiver.

Abel's face tensed up when he heard such bad news.

—Orders from Cardinal Caterina. Father Tres will take control of the city along with the Partisans. Father Abel will come with us to try and stop *The Star* by all means possible.

### III

The mute sound that came from some unknown place made the anti-UV ray glass vibrate and it also created ripples on the untouched, cold bowl of soup. The Marquis, that had been looking at the hologram, turned around suddenly like if he had just woken up from a dream.

—What was that?

—Seems to be coming from the aerodrome.

Seeing the column of golden fire rising in the distance, Dietrich stood up and took his coat.

—I'm going to see what's going on. I'll be right back.

Esther remained seated, looking how the young man crossed the room quickly; meanwhile in her head the words of the Marquis resonated:

*"The Partisans and the Vatican's priest are no longer in this world."* That is, she had no one, no one...

"What am I going to do?"

The impression was such that she was unable to react to anything. The only thing that was in Esther's head was how to stop the vampire she had in front of her. She no longer had anyone to help her, an equivalent to a hundred men completely armed. It was impossible for a girl like her to beat him.



Yet, she had no other choice but to do it.

*“Rather than feeling sorry for ourselves, I’d be better for us to think what to do next”*, the priest that would never accompany her again had told her. What Esther had to do now was defeat the monster in front of her. She had to get revenge on the creature who had taken everything she had loved the most and that now was trying to take over the world.

But how, how to defeat the monster?

Esther’s hand, which was unconsciously playing with the rosary, suddenly stopped.

The rosary was made of silver and had a sharp edge. If she managed to pierce a vital point of her enemy...

Silver, along with UV rays, were a vampire’s weak points. Even if they were pierced with a sword, or had their brains blown out, they could regenerate, but against silver they had a violent reaction. Even a small cut could kill them.

Either way, the speed of vampires was extraordinary. In their haste mode, they were impossible to surpass, but even in their normal state, there was no human that could compete with their six senses and their motor nerves. With a slight movement of his hand, the monster was capable of snapping her neck. If only she could find an opening. An opening...

—What a beautiful lady—Esther said, standing up to get closer to the portrait on the wall, her knees wobbly. She had the rosary hidden in her fist.

—So beautiful... Is she a relative of yours, Marquis of Hungary?

—My wife —the Marquis answered, walking towards the portrait with a melancholic expression on his face.

—The last woman I lived with... She was a wonderful person in all aspects.

—Where is she now?

—Now... she is nowhere —the vampire responded, bringing his face close to the portrait, like trying to touch skin, and he added, behind Esther:

—She died... Your fellow countrymen killed her.

—Eh? —Esther’s hand, which had been ready to strike, stopped suddenly.

—Maria... My wife was a Terran. A Terran like you, but the Church could not forgive the fact that she loved me. Then one night... they incited the rabble of the city to kill her.—the Marquis yelled, violently hitting the wall with his fist. The half bitten nails made crevices on his palms.

—Why?! Why did you hate her? I understand that you wanted to kill me, but why kill my wife, who had done no wrong and she was one of you?

The woman in the portrait kept smiling like always, looking at her husband from a top. It was such a marvelous portrait that it was hard to imagine that she had been dead for decades. And because of that, it must be especially hard for the Marquis to look at the portrait, knowing that she was no longer in this world. The vampire continued between dark imprecations.

—I wanted revenge. Not only against the people of this city, but against all Terran and the Vatican. I wanted to get revenge on them using the inheritance of my wife and her ancestors.

—The inheritance? What inheritance?

—*The Star of Sorrow*. It was my wife who restored the control systems so that it could work again. She was the programmer I invited to use *The Star* again.

From amongst all the legacies of the world before the Armageddon, computers were the most mysterious Technologies. Only those called “programmers” had the technical ability to decipher the significance of the huge amount of digits.

—*The Star* is not the weapon you are thinking about. Originally, it was an electricity transmitter satellite created by our ancestors after the Armageddon. It obtained electricity through micro solar modules installed in the moon and it send it to the surface through a laser...If we had been capable of restoring it, this poor city...many cities, actually... would had been able to recover, but the Vatican thought we were trying to obtain a weapon of mass destruction. That’s why they killed her.

The Marquis’ explanation was more than what Esther could comprehend, but it was clear to her that at some point, in the past, the vampire had tried to make life better for the people of the city. Being told something like that, so suddenly, it was a story that was difficult to believe. If it was true, that meant that the same monster that had been oppressing the city had at one point worked to help humanity!

—After the death of my wife, it was impossible for me to recuperate the system. Attacking the cathedral to exact revenge was just pandering to the Vatican. For a long time I remained inactive in my desperation...until they got in contact with me.

—They?

—The ones that helped me restore the system. They call themselves The Order; I’m not sure which one. They were Methuselah and Terrans and they said

that they fought against the Vatican... That was enough for me. With their help, I was able to obtain *The Star of Sorrow*. Dietrich was the programmer The Order send to me.

—Uh...

Esther tried to tranquilize herself while trying to untangle the thoughts that had become jumbled in her head. Her hands were sweating so much that the rosary was in danger of slipping from her hands. What was the difference between the vampire, who fought against the Vatican in order to avenge his wife, and herself, who wanted to kill him to avenge her family?

—All for revenge, right, Marquis of Hungary? —Esther said, gritting her teeth as she slowly approached the marquis from behind.

—That is correct...That is why I fight against Terrans. I wanted to make them pay...

—...

Then, this is vengeance too.

Esther stealthily brandished the rosary. The Marquis was engrossed in the conversation and he wasn't paying attention to what was going on behind him. The girl lifted her improvised weapon with both hands like if it was a knife. If she managed to stab him in the soft muscles in his neck, she would surely kill him. Holding her breath, Esther threw her weapon against the exposed neck...

—... But now that I think about it, maybe it was a mistake.

In that instant, Esther's hands remained frozen in the air. If she had continued, surely she would have pierced the Marquis' flesh, but in the vampire's voice was laced with profound emotion, between affliction and regret, that made her doubt at the last minute. It was a fatal error.

The Marquis had turned around instantly. The sharp edge that Esther held shined in his grey eyes and his surprise turned into rage.

—What?!

Finally bringing down the rosary, Esther had lost her pose. Even if her enemy had been human, she would have been unable to kill him, but she was fighting against a monster...against a vampire.

The Marquis raised his hand to eye level and stopped the rosary. The tip pierced the skin of his palm a few millimeters and a horrible smoke stench could be smelled.

—Damn Terran!

With a violent swat of his arm, he sent Esther flying through the air, and she hit the wall and bounced to the floor.

—Ah!

The blow, enough to snap her neck, had left her breathless. She tried to get up to fill her lungs with air, but the Marquis had grabbed her by the hair.

—Damn Terran!

Picking the struggling girl with ease, the Marquis showed off his long fangs. On his face there was no longer any trace of the tenderness he had showed just a few moments before. Now he had become a monster born in darkness, the strongest combat animal on Earth.

—You thought you could catch me unguarded, you foul monkey? You underestimate me!

The vampire placed a hard-as-steel finger on the girl's throat. On the white skin light blue veins popped. With a cry that was between sadness and pleasure, the vampire pounced on Esther's throat, his fangs bared... Then, the anti-UV ray crystal that was in front of Esther shattered.

—Esther!

The Marquis, who was about to sink his fangs into the girl's throat, had no time to turn around. When he heard the voice of the young man, a silver bullet had already pierced his shoulder.

#### IV

Leaving the vampire killed by the silver bullet on the floor, Abel ran towards Esther, who was breathing with difficulty. He stood her up and hugged her.

—Are you ok, Esther?

—Ah... Father...! —murmured Esther as she lifted her gaze towards the priest's face.

— You're... you're alive...

—Yes, but we'll talk about that later. We need to get out of here fast!

—No... no! We need to stop *The Star* before it destroys Rome!

—Rome? What are you talking about?

—The... Father, behind you!

Abel did not turn around. In the blue eyes of the girl he was hugging a figure appeared...

Without letting go of Esther, Abel fell to one side. A light had torn a sleeve from his habit to pieces with a skirl sound. Making a trail, the light returned to attack him once more. Two falls, three falls... He reached the wall trying to outrun the lie, and when he finally got up, his habit was torn to shreds and his skin could be seen under it, red like a pomegranate.



—Impossible! —whimpered Abel, like if he didn't even feel the pain.

If it weren't for the fact that he was wearing his glasses, he could've sworn that he had seen how the vampire fall to the floor, killed by that silver bullet. Yet, the moonlight that filtered in through the broken windows illuminated a figure.

—Impossible! With the amount of silver I shot into his body!

—Damn Terrans... —The Marquis, who's blazing eyes seemed to come straight out of Hell, spat.

From his fists, sharp blades that seemed to come out of his bones were piercing his skin. His suit was full of bullet holes and a dark liquid covered his body. Around the wounds, the flesh had gone black due to the poisonous effect of the silver molecules on a Methuselah's body. However, the vampire dugged into the wounds with disinterest, like if they didn't hurt at all.

—Ah!

Esther covered her face, which had paled before the gruesome image. The Marquis had just taken out the bullets from the poisoned wounds. AS he cut the blackened skin, a shadow of terror crossed his face.

—Abel Nightroad, you Vatican dog! You've come at the right time. Now is when Rome will be destroyed.—The Marquis said, dripping with evil, while he lifted an arm. With the sound of flesh tearing, the blades on the fists appeared.

— But of course you won't live to see it!

The Marquis joined his fists which produced a high-pitched sound that covered the whole space. Abel frowned at such terrible sound, then...

—Ah!

Clucking his tongue, the Marquis jumped. Breaking up into many countless rays, a light whiter than the moon's appeared.

—Eh?!

Abel revolver became a mirage just as he raised it to pull the trigger. The Marquis did not dodge the six bullets fired at him.

Crossing the space that had just been occupied by Abel, who had jumped to tone side while holding Esther as soon as the shots commenced, he pounced on the wall behind them. The blades, made of really fine layers, vibrated at great speeds and produced a high-frequency wave. With a horrifying wail, they pierced the wall and left it looking like a honeycomb.

—Ah, good reflexes! It's obvious you are an AX agent. You have some bionic enhancements?

—...

The Marquis, walked impassively towards Abel, who took a step back. Not one of the six bullets had hit the vampire. The high-frequency wave had flattened them all in flight.

Joining the blades produced the same high-pitch sound as before. Behind the intercrossed blades, the Marquis had a macabre smile.

—What's wrong, Krusnik? Didn't you want to kill me and stop *The Star of Sorrow*? You still have a few hundred seconds...

On the hologram on the table the countdown had begun.

—The coordinates of the objective: forty one dash fifty three degrees north; twelve dash twenty nine degrees east. Ninety seconds for impact in Rome.—The A.I.'s mechanical voice said, coldly announcing the death of the biggest city in the world. .

—If you're not coming for me, then have to go for you!

—!

Abel hesitated, aiming at the whirlwind that had become the Marquis. He couldn't kill him like that. What chances did he have?

The priest threw a canister he carried with him towards the Marquis. Inside it had the gunpowder he used to refill the gun. Abel aimed at the canister and shot without doubt.

The room filled with the sound of the explosion at the same time that a stream of fire and smoke rose. The explosion created a golden wall between the whirlwind with the blades and them.

—Did I do it?!

—Ah!

The Marquis joined his fists at the same time he let out a heart-wrenching scream. The shrill sound reverberated three times, and using the resonance as a shield, the vampire jumped into the fire wall.

—Eh?

When he finally realized the sonic wave that had crossed the fire, it was too late. Abel's body was blown away violently by the white light.

—Bam!

It was a miracle that Esther hit the wall on her side. She completely lost sensibility on her left arm. It was very likely that the bones might have crushed some muscles. The glasses that had fallen beside her were completely broken by the high frequency wave.

—Aaaaaaaaaaah!

However, who screamed wasn't Abel. The Marquis whimpered and grabbed his right shoulder, which was dripping blood. His arm was had been severed from the elbow. The barrage had destroyed it as he crossed the fire. He could no longer use his high-frequency shield.

—...

The priest's face showed no satisfaction for his victory. Looking at the Methuselah with oddly sad eyes, Abel pulled the trigger. The bullet hit the white skin cleanly between the eyebrows.

—!

A thud accompanied the blood splatter.

At the same time as the foamy, red blood flowed from between his lips, the figure collapsed.

—Im...impossible!

—Fa...Father!

The one who had fallen in a silent whimper was the priest. His last shot had grazed the Marquis' ear and had embedded itself between the eyebrows of the lady in the portrait. A huge weapon pierced Abel's stomach.

It was the Marquis' severed arm. At the last minute the vampire had thrown himself on the floor and had kicked his inert arm towards Abel. The blades had been pointing forward like a lance and they had cleanly pierced the priest's stomach.

—Father! Father!

—... That's that —the vampire said coldly, looking at the girl who had rushed to the priest's side, out of the corner of his eye.

There was seven seconds left.

Abel coughed, spitting a trail of crimson blood. He was beyond saving.

Five seconds left.

The Marquis looked excitedly at the sad dawn that had started to blaze beyond the terrace. *The Star* was gathering energy, moving at four thousand meters per second. It was the same energy that was supposed to bring happiness; the same energy that he would have liked to have contemplated with his wife in peace.

One second left.

—It's over.

And in the same instant that the Marquis' sighed...

There was a huge explosion.

## V

The explosion was accompanied by a blinding light. Pieces of the anti-UV ray crystals flew out everywhere.

—Wh...What just happened?

The force of the wind threatened to blow them away. Moving away the pieces of crystal that had flown all over the room, the Marquis yelled in a nervous voice. His field of vision had gone completely white and he couldn't see anything, but he refused to believe what the pressure in his temples and the vibrations in the air were telling him.

Even for a Methuselah's sharp vision, recovering from such blindness required a few seconds. When some figures finally started reappearing, the Marquis was left breathless.

—Pe...Pest!

The city that once extended over the other riverbank had completely disappeared. In its place there was a huge crater centered on what once had been Guard headquarters. The Danube's current had penetrated the bowl-shaped opening and was making swirls.

—*The...The Star of Sorrow!*

The Marquis knew perfectly well what that explosion meant. A weapon that destructive could be no other than *The Star of Sorrow*, but if the objective was Rome, why had it hit there, where they were?

—It's not possible...! There must have been an error in the calculations!

—the Marquis wailed, looking at the numbers on the controls intently.

The program that had been restored by the Marquis, his wife and The Order was made up of many digits. Different numbers showed that *The Star of Sorrow* was in perfect working order; however, the coordinates of the objectives were radically different to the ones the Marquis had given. Besides, *The Star* was already moving on to a third objective!

—Impossible...This is impossible! Dietrich! Someone call Dietrich!

—You called, Marquis of Hungary?

It seemed like he had really heard the Marquis' voice. On the hologram on the table the face of the beautiful young man appeared suddenly.

—Dietrich! Where the hell are you? Get back here now! There has been a problem with the entering of the objectives! If we don't do something, Istavan...!

—There's a problem? No, Your Excellency, the numbers are perfectly fine—said the young man, smiling in a condescending way.

—The second objective was Guard headquarters. The third objective is Pest's center. The fourth is Vérhegy and your palace. Everything is how it's supposed to be.

—It this a joke? Have you... have you...? —The Marquis asked, agitated. He remained still, like if he had forgotten the pain of the arm he had just lost.

—Dietrich, has betrayed us! You've been using me for...!

—I have not used you for anything. What I've used has been *The Star of Sorrow*. What do I need with a stupid monster? Don't be so full of yourself.

—What the hell are you thinking? — The Marquis bellowed towards the demonic young man who cocked his head as he smiled with an angelic expression.

—You said you'd help me with my vengeance...Was it a lie that you were going to help me against the Vatican?

—It wasn't a lie. One of our objectives is to fight against the Vatican, but my mission is bigger and more refined than your crude plan to avenge your wife's death by gunfire. Please don't judge me with the same standards.

The Marquis thought about the young man's venomous words for a bit, then he frowned like if he had just realized something.

—Now I get it! You had no intention of destroying Rome, am I right? Your objective was to use *The Star of Sorrow* to cause a conflict between the Vatican and the Empire.

—Oooh, wonderful! That's the right answer —Dietrich said in a tone a teacher would use to compliment a dimwitted student who finally got the right answer.

— Like you say, the objective is to cause a war between the Vatican and the Empire. That is what The Order hopes for.

The Vatican and the Empire. It seemed strange that given the circumstances that there has been no conflict between the greatest force of humanity and the vampires in ages. Obviously, skirmishes were not unheard of, but that last frontal clash between them happened two-hundred and-seventy years ago, when Pope Sylvester XIX had called XI Crusade, which had been defeated and annihilated in Debrecen, one-hundred and twenty-five miles from Istavan.

There were a few reasons to explain that equilibrium. One of them was the existence of Istavan in between the territories dominated by both contenders. For humanity it was normally a free city, and for vampire it was, actually, the domain of the Marquis of Hungary. The complex duality of the territory had allowed for the zone to become an intermediary. If one of the two powers unilaterally annexed it...

—A war would break out between both powers... That is why it makes no sense to destroy Rome right now. We need them to use all their forces to fight against the Empire.

—Wait a minute... Then The Order... Who are you? —The Marquis barked as he kicked the floor.

—Answer me! What does The Order think? What does it hope to gain by the war between Methuselah and Terrans? Who...?

—Nobody. We are Contra Mundi.

—Contra Mundi?

Esther frowned upon such odd words. She had only understood about half of what Dietrich said, but his expression gave her a horrible feeling.

Dietrich watched, enthralled as the Marquis snapped his teeth, but then he turned towards the wall and saw Esther, who was hugging the fallen priest.

—Esther...it's a shame that this has to end like this. I really liked you a lot, you know?

—How dare you?! —Esther cut him off. She wanted to spit the image of the beautiful Young man on the screen.

— You are despicable! How many people are you going to sell out?

—For the record, I don't do it because I like to... Gee, you look really angry.— Dietrich said half joking, as he put his hair back and sighed. His lovely melancholic expression seemed authentic. He gave Esther a meaningful look.

— Well, as an apology I'll tell you something. Listen well, these are magic words: *igne natura renovatur integra*.

Dietrich's words caused Abel to stir. However, Esther did not notice that, instead she spit the hologram.

—Eh? What did those words mean?

—It's the code to stop *The Star of Sorrow*. Not even the Marquis of Hungary knew it. If you input it into the controls, *The Star* will self-destruct.

—?!

Esther realized that her body stiffened as she heard his words. Next to her, the Marquis opened his eyes wide.

—Im... impossible! I am not that stupid as to believe that you could have kept something like that from me.

—How sad, and here I was trying to redeem myself. —Dietrich sighed, deeply saddened.

—If you don't believe me, try imputing it into the controls. You'll see I am not lying...

Looking to one side in an obvious manner, the young man held his breath in a theatrical way.

—That is, of course, if nobody tries to stop you...

Sparks flew between the stares of Dietrich, Esther and the bloody Marquis. All three pairs of eyes looked at the keyboard that was in plain view on the table.

Looking at the silent combat going on before his eyes, the young man said:

—Goodbye, Esther. I love you...Go for it!

Just then the diabolical image of the young man disappeared laughing breathlessly...

—I need to stop it!

—No!

It was as if they had been waiting for a signal, the young Terran girl and the aristocratic Methuselah lunged at the keyboard. Esther was closer.

—I won't allow it!

But a human is no match for a vampire's speed. The girl's body went flying, pushed to the side with great strength. The Marquis firmly placed himself in front of the table as if protecting it.

—*The Star of Sorrow* is my...my last hope! I won't let anyone destroy it!

From the floor, Esther got up, decided, feeling the cold metal with the tip of her fingers.

—Don't say foolish things, Marquis of Hungary! — she said, urging the aristocrat who could not hide his tumult.

— Didn't you listen to the traitor? If we don't do something, you will die too!

—No! We don't know that yet! I need to regain control!

—There is no time for that! —Esther said while she aimed the weapon and prepared the firing pin. It was heavier than she had anticipated.

— Please, move! Let me destroy *The Star*!

—I see I should have killed you then, Terran—the Marquis spat, his eyes crazy as he stood in front of the girl who was aiming at him with Abel's old revolver. On his left hand the blades has reappeared.

— Whatever the reason, I cannot allow someone that knows the self-destruct code live...die!

—Ah!

Instinctively she shot towards the whirlwind that approached her.

At the same time as the first shot was heard, she aimed the firing pin to make a second shot.

But just then, she realized a fatal error.

It's out of bullets!

—Die, Terran!

The blades had become thunder and drew a sure path towards the girl's flesh. With her eyes closed, Esther saw as her head went flying in a bloody mess...

A sound like flesh hitting a solid object resonated throughout.

—You!

Still with her eyes shut tight, Esther heard the Marquis' confused voice.

—Impossible! How can a Terran move around with such wounds?

Esther shyly opened her eyes to see that in front of her was a very tall habit.

## VI

— Impossible! How can a Terran move around with such wounds?—moaned the Marquis as the priest's figure stood in front of him to block him from the novice.

No matter how you looked at it, Abel's body was full of wounds.



Not only were his clothes soaked in blood, but the Marquis' right arm was still embedded in his torso. If he had been a normal human, there was no doubt he'd been dead already.

However, despite the paleness in his face, he showed no signs of pain. Or anger. A sad light shined in his winter-lake eyes.

—You... You are not a simple human!

The Marquis' teeth chattered as he tried to move his arm with the unsheathed blades that Abel had stopped. There weren't that many creatures that could withstand the beastly wrenching force of a vampire. He must have some sort of bionic implant, or maybe he was a mechanized soldier, or...

—Aaaaah!

With a heroic scream the Marquis side kicked the priest's head. His speed was above the reaction times of any human and had the strength to pulverize a rock. If his adversary was human, before he even knew what hit him his head would have been lopped off and his body would be drowning in a lake of blood. But the one that went flying was the Marquis.

Just before impacting the wall, he managed to curl his body to absorb the shock. Activating the equilibrium in his legs to the max, the Marquis stood on the wall. His face was deformed by fear.

—What... what is that strength?

—Have you never thought about it?



As opposed to the Marquis, the priest was coolly standing, his voice relaxed. He removed the arm from his stomach and taking it close to his face he continued:

—Cows and chickens serve as food for humans. Human blood is your food. Then, vampires should be someone's food, no?

—What?!

The Marquis looked strained. In the priest's mouth you could see two sharp fangs. In an instant the fangs buried themselves in the Marquis' right arm. Red drops began to run down the priest's lips as he moved around.

—It...it can't be...! the blood... my blood!

The Marquis arm was rapidly withering. Abel sipped as if he wanted to suck up every last drop of blood and the extremity turned into a mass of dried skin and bones.

*“What is he supposed to be?”*

The Marquis stepped back unconsciously as he ground his teeth.

He wasn't a Terran, nor a Methuselah... a bionic soldier? A mechanized soldier? No, it wasn't something as simple as that.

—Nanomachine Krusnik 02 initiating operations at forty-percent limit. Confirmed.

Along with the voice that seemed to come from the depths of the Earth, the eyes that up to then had remained as clean as a winter lake had turned the color of blood.

Throwing the arm which he had sucked dry, to the floor, the creature introduced itself.

—I am a Krusnik. I am a vampire that drinks the blood of vampires.

—... I had heard rumors... —The Marquis whimpered, without realizing that his fangs had appeared too.

— ...that the Vatican raised some special monsters... and gave them illegal missions... Are you one of them?

—Gyula Kádár, Marquis of Hungary, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, you are under arrest under suspicion of murder and sedition. I advise that you drop your weapons now.

—Don't say stupidities, Vatican! —The Marquis angrily roared, his blades ringing.

Dividing the layers thinly, an extra layer appeared on each side. He vibrated the blades against each other and the air around him started to smoke at the same time that the high frequency wave evaporated the humidity in the air.

—I am the Marquis of Hungary! A proud Methuselah! I will not kneel and grovel at the feet of a dog like you, Krusnik or whatever you are!

The Marquis extended his arm without moving. Abel's figure wavered a bit. The blades crossed the emptiness barely grazing him. The priest's hair danced in the air as he jumped towards the ceiling.

—You won't get away!

Kicking the floor, the Marquis quickly climbed the walls brandishing his blades at the figure that stood upside down on the ceiling.

—Die, agent!

With a wet sound, he scratched Abel's arm, but instead of fresh blood, a black liquid came out. With a shininess that was between metallic and resinous, the substance quickly hardened in Abel's hand and it became a huge double-edge scythe.

Crossing blades with the Marquis, they created a metallic sound that sounded like the laughter of an evil entity.

—You don't want to give up, Marquis?

It was a crushing strength. The Marquis' body fell to the ground. The red-eyed monster descended in silence at his side and said calmly:

—If at all possible, I would rather not hurt you anymore.

—Stop saying stupidities! I am the Marquis of Hungary! I have my pride! You think I'm going to bow down to a Vatican dog? —the aristocrat screamed, arching his arm.

— If I am going to die today, I will at least take you with me, Nightroad!

From the three blades surged a strange hum. With a tremendous howl, the Marquis lunged at the diabolical habit. The blades grazed Abel's shadow, who had moved to avoid the hit, and ended up stuck to the wall. The hard plastic flew everywhere like if there had been an explosion, and the blades quickly retracted into the hand. The priest's scythe buzzed through the air, but it only managed to hit the vampire's shadow, who kicking the floor hard, flew through the air and took out the blades again. The scythe stopped them again. Using his foe's strength, he dropped him to the floor and continued with lateral attack. His muscular and respiratory strength being out of the ordinary allowed him to ignore physics in his movements. Between the vampire that flew through the air and the priest that backed away sliding on the floor, a vertiginous, bright light produced by their blades crossing shined.

With a decidedly metallic sound, the two demonic figures stopped. The Marquis had cornered Abel against the wall and struggled with him laughing.

—Prepare to die, Nightroad!

Something appeared from the space between the aristocrat's arms. Through the tatters of his clothes, a white light emitted. Did Abel understand that that was the vampire's sharp, curved, ribs? Undulating his body, the eight bones attacked the priest who was unable to move since his arms were pinned, in eight different spots. The evil light mercilessly struck...

—What?



The one who had shouted in surprise and pain, his eyes narrowing, had been the Marquis. The exposed ribs uselessly scratched the air. At impact, something had covered Abel. A surface as hard as diamonds, had broken the vampire's deadly weapons.

—Wings...they're wings...

Behind the young man crowned by white hair, two giant shadows emerged. It was two long wings, as tall as their owner...

—But... Krusnik... What are you, Krusnik?

—I am...

Hearing the priest's words, the Marquis' eyes opened wider.

—Impossible! But you... No! Our body...

The wings, darker than night, flapped to drown out the aristocrat's voice. The scythe turned towards the vampire who had backed away unconsciously at the wind's pressure.

—Shit!

Launching a dissonant noise, the blades shattered into a million pieces. The scythe had literally turned them into dust. Seeing that he had lost his last weapon, the Marquis faltered.

—This is the end.

With a dark flash, the scythe fell on him.

## VII

—Did you kill him?

—...

The priest remained very quiet at the novice's fearful question. Those horrifying organs had disappeared from his back and his eyes had returned to their normal color of a limpid winter lake.

—Father, what are yo...?

—Don't worry about me, Esther —Abel cut her off, putting his glasses away as if nothing had happened and urging her with his gaze.

—Take care of this, please.

The countdown continued on the hologram. The sky was beginning to show its third aurora. Esther was going to say something else, but she instead just nodded and ran towards the keyboard.

After making sure the girl had gone, Abel looked down at his feet. The aristocrat had fallen, covered in blood, with his right arm cut off and a huge hole in his stomach. However, he was a Methuselah: the strongest creature in the planet.

—Why don't you kill me? —the Marquis asked his adversary with a hoarse yet strangely clear voice.

—Killing me is your mission... Or do you want to have fun at my expense and humiliation?

My obligation is to simply destroy The Star of Sorrow, not to kill you, Marquis of Hungary. Besides, I don't like to harass people.

—People?

A strange light shined in the Marquis's eyes, who had turned to look at Abel. This man called him, a vampire, "*person*"?

—Yes, people... Esther, how are things over there?

—I've entered the code. I had helped the Bishop with type writers, but this is the first time I use a computer.

After typing on the keyboard, that was strange to her, Esther checked the text on the screen once more.

*Ignе natura renovatur integra*. After checking that she had not made any mistakes when she imputed the series of letters in that strange tongue, she presses enter.

—That's it, huh?

Esther looked at the screen with satisfaction, but then, suddenly, she frowned.

The countdown had not stopped.

—That's odd...

No matter how many times she hit enter, she received no response. *The Star of Sorrow* would have to have exploded by then. Why wasn't the countdown stopping?

—Why...?

—What's wrong?

Next to the nervous girl, the priest looked at the screen, surprised.

—Did you input the code in correctly?

—Yes, just like Dietrich said...

—Hello, Esther

The screen suddenly changed.

Instead of the cold computer voice, a beautiful, yet malice-filled smile appeared.

—If you are seeing this that means you've imputed the code I gave you.

—Dietrich! —Esther shouted with a jerk.

—What are you trying to do?

—Calm down, Esther... This is not a live stream, but a video file saved on the computer.

Just like Abel had said with a concerned face, the young man kept talking without reacting to her voice.

Esther, I have to apologize for something. The code that you've imputed is not the one for self-destruction... In reality, it's for a change of objective.

—What?!

Dietrich spoke in a light tone, like if he was apologizing for standing her up on a date, but the significance of his words were enough for Esther's face to suddenly change colors.

—But you can stay calm. Istavan is safe. Nothing will happen to you. The objective had shifted over to Byzantium... You know where Byzantium is? It's the Empire's capital, the nest of the vampires you so hate...

—Ah!

In effect, the coordinates on the screen had changed. Esther was incapable of understanding their significance, but if they were really aimed at the Empire...

—If the Imperial capital is attacked, surely they would not stay with their arms crossed. The definitive battle between humanity and the vampires would begin... What do you think, Esther? How do you feel to be the one that gave the go-ahead for the final war?

—I hate you! —Even though she knew that it was nothing more than a recording, Esther could not hold back the scream.

—I hate you more than anything in the world!

—After telling you so many lies, the fact that you would still believe me... Truly, you are a good person, but oh well, that is exactly what I like about you... Good bye, Esther. I hope we meet again in the future.

Holding back his laughter, the young man's image disappeared. Esther continued to look at the screen with hatred, but the touch of a bloody hand returned her to reality.

—Father!

—Esther, move, please.

Abel passed her by silently and placed himself firmly in front of the keyboard. His blue eyes shined reflecting the light of the screen.

—It's useless, Father Nightroad... The computer of *The Star of Sorrow* is special. According to what that damn Dietrich said, it's a relic from before the Armageddon. Even if you tr...

—...

Abel did not answer to the Marquis' huffing voice. Trailing the numbers on the screen with his eyes, he placed his fingers on the keyboard and began to operate the controllers quickly. At first, he types slowly, but soon he began to pick up speed.

—Huh...Father...?

Esther was besides him looking in awe. The fingers moved with the ease of a pianist sitting in front of the keys. The use of computers was something extremely difficult that required the specialized programmers to have a huge understanding of them and be extremely observant. It wasn't something that just anybody could do.

—Fa...Father, just typing away without knowing is not going to hel...



—Silence.

The voice that cut Esther off was so cold that it seemed like it had become part of the machine. Abel kept typing, but the countdown was not stopping. The sound of the typing seemed to want to compete with the numbers that kept streaming nonstop.

—Forty seconds for impact. Thirty-nine, thirty-eight, thirty-seven...

The priest's hands stopped as soon as the mechanical voice started announcing the last seconds of the countdown. He raised his pale face that looked like if they had just exorcised an evil spirit. Ignoring Esther, whose stare was caressing him, he mumbled in a cold voice:

— Voice control interface. Request a change to the system administrator mode.

—...

Instantly, the voice that announced the countdown stopped. And not only the voice. The numbers that kept rapidly changing on the screen also stopped. The computer's status was like that of a dog that had quickly lifted his head when he heard the voice of the owner he thought dead.

—... Understood.

The voice, barely audible, was not the mechanic voice of indeterminate sex that had been speaking up till then, but a soft female's voice that began speaking with a respectful tone of a faithful vassal addressing her master.

— Switching to system administrator mode. The execution tasks will recommence immediately. Thirty seconds for impact, twenty nine, twenty eight, twenty seven...

— Preferential distribution to the root of the internal commands for system emergencies. Freeze all running tasks.

—The commands have been destroyed by the administrator. Refer back to address R200055 for the origin of the error.

—That is not necessary.

He seemed like a completely different person, with a radically different voice. It was as if God had started chatting with the Devil. While Esther stared at him, stupefied, Abel clucked his tongue and quickly uttered another spell.

—Aren't there a few possibilities for me to use to freeze the system? I'm running out of time. There is no need to see the address.

—Understood, initiating search... search complete. There is an archive that matches the parameters of the search.

—What does it say?

— Code-based self-destruct preservation regulations 3090.

—...

Abel's lips stopped. It was as if he wanted to apologize for something, his eyes turned to the Marquis, but he could not lose any time.

—Introduction of the self-destruct code. Self-destruct code based on preservation regulations 3090.

—In order input the code, a security password A special or higher is required. Input the password, please.

—An administrator's security password... —the priest sighed, and he uttered yet another spell.

—Commander of the International Starfleet Abel Nightroad. Security Service of the Department of Control of the Red Mars Project. Reconnaissance code UNASF 94181 RMOC 1666102 AK.

—Code confirmed —the voice said respectfully—. Initiating the self-destruct based on the regulation for preservation 3090. The destruction of the system will completely destroy satellite 7792. Thank you for using this program.

—...

The calm voice suddenly stopped and at the same time the numbers disappeared from the interface.

What must he be thinking as he saw the screen go black? The priest sighed deeply and looking out beyond the window, he mumbled at no one in particular.

—Good job...

Looking up he could see the night's moon rising on the east: the First Moon, the one that had been with this planet since inception. The Second Moon remained in the southern skies, like an evil presence or the eye of some god that watched over the destiny of humans. It was a deformed light also called "The Vampire's Moon", that seemed to be the mischief of some devil.

It was clearly seen how the great star that had been shining more than the others slowly lost its shine...

—What has happened? —Esther whimpered weakly. With her limited knowledge she was unable to comprehend what had just happened before her eyes, but she knew it was something big.

—What happened to *The Star*?

—*The Star* is no more —a voice answered her from the ground.

—*The Star* is no more... Everything has finished. Or rather, you have finished it.—the Marquis continued, moving his tender gaze away from Esther towards the silent priest.

—I see that you are exactly what I thought you were, Father Nightroad.

—...

Abel turned towards the fallen vampire who was trying to talk to him, in an affable manner. Maybe it was because the Marquis took his gesture to mean he

didn't need to talk, or because of his injuries, but the aristocrat assented silently and changed the subject, his expression serene.

—By the way, can I ask something of you, Father Nightroad? —Even though he had lost an arm and been stabbed through the stomach, the vital force of a Methuselah allowed him to keep his voice. The injured vampire continued in a hoarse, yet clear, voice.

—If you send me to Rome, they will kill me. Since I have to die, I would rather it not be at hands of the Roman Inquisition... Will you allow me to offer the sister the opportunity to take her revenge?

—Eh?

The girl, who until then had remained silent, looked up, surprised and looked at Abel and the Marquis repeatedly unable to process what they were saying. Looking at the Marquis' bloody face, he continued talking in a calm tone:

—I have taken the person this girl loved more than anyone in the world... She has a right for revenge. That is the correct thing to do. I have the obligation of letting her kill me.

—...

Abel opened and closed his mouth two to three times like if he was going to say something, but in the end he uttered no words and simply picked up his antique revolver from the floor.

—Esther, take this —the priest said, reloading the weapon and placing it in the nun's hands with the firing pin pointing towards the target.

—It's loaded with silver bullets... If you shoot him in the head or heart, death will be instant.

—...

It was as if she was confused by the weight of the metal that had been placed in her hand, but Esther remained looking at the deadly weapon and the bloody vampire on the floor.

—I am sorry... —The Marquis' serene voice apologized.

—My vengeance was correct. Nobody can tell me I was wrong, but to take away the person you loved the most... that gives you the right to take revenge too..

—I... I...

*"What am I going to do?"* Esther asked herself while she touched the cold trigger of the weapon the priest had placed on her trembling hands.

The Bishop, who had taken care of her since she had been orphaned, so many Partisan comrades, all the people of the city... They had all died because of this vampire.

It wasn't that she was lacking motivation to kill him. She wasn't a god or an angel. Just like she knew how to love, she also knew how to hate.

But she had understood that the man before her was capable of that too.

—I hate you. I want to take my revenge for the Bishop and the rest. You can be sure of that, but... —the girl said softly, her voice breaking, — but I don't think that is right for me to kill you.

The Marquis turned his head and looked up, surprised at the same time that Abel watched her with eyes of a lost child.

—It may be that I can't understand because I am dumb, but... it doesn't matter... I don't think it is right... Father, is it weird to think that?

—No, not at all...

With a huge smile, like if he had seen all the good in the world, the priest shook his head. Still smiling, he turned to the Marquis, who remained silent.

—Hate does not bring us anything. I am a little ashamed to be the one saying this, but that's how it is, Marquis. So that's why, abandon the idea of having her kill you... Look, the city is calmer now.

Even though on the streets visible from the terrace some errant barrage or explosion could be heard, the end of the fight was approaching.

It couldn't be said that they had regained peace yet, but at least they were on their way to normalcy.

At that moment, a figure entered the room and Abel raised his hand to wave.

—Hello, Tres. Are you finished?

—Positive. Ninety-seven percent of the Guard troops in the city have been defeated.

The voice of Father Tres Iqus, Gunslinger, was monotonous as always, but his response was that of mechanical precision.

—Losing control of their headquarters, they also lost the will to fight and have begun to surrender. The citizens have started joining the Partisans, allowing for the combats to continue without problems. The Iron Maiden is wiping out the last pockets of resistance with the help of the Partisans. Everything will probably be over before the Vatican troops arrive.

—I'm glad to hear that.

They had suffered some losses, but they had avoided that the city become a battlefield. For the neighboring countries, this must show that the Vatican had acted kindly towards Istavan. Soon they would recover and would begin to receive food rations. They would do whatever was necessary so that the exhausted citizens could survive winter.

Abel turned to the terrace once more. Some screams could be heard, probably indicating that the Partisans had arrived at the palace.

—Then it's out time to go and leave the rest to the Partisans...

—I won't let you get away, you piece of shit priest! —a voice suddenly roared from the garden.

Under the blood and dust the dark blue uniform had become invisible, but there was no doubt that the evil face of a meat-eating fish and the exposed fangs belonged to a Radcon. Weren't the Partisans looking after him? How had he managed to escape? It was strange for the figure covered in blood to be alive still.

But like a zombie motivated by hatred and obsession, the bloody giant was planted in the garden and in his hand he carried a crossbow that was strangely familiar.

—Die!

There was no time to react. The giant had thrown towards Esther her own crossbow.

At the same time, behind the girl the M13 roared, shooting above her shoulder. The 13mm bullet cleanly struck between the giant's eyes, and came out through the back of his head; his brain exploded.

But the arrow he had shot...

—Ma... Marquis of Hungary! —Esther wailed.

A figure without a right arm had stood before her like a wall. In his chest protruded an arrow covered in a silver solution.

—...

Backing away while the flesh tore away with a horrendous smell, the Marquis' body fell once more. Esther got on her knees instinctively and took him in her arms, but the convulsions had already begun.

—Why? Why did you...?

—Why...?

Even the vital force of a Methuselah was incapable of withstanding an arrow lathered in a silver solution to the heart. A white layer started to rapidly cover the Marquis' eyes. He was coughing and vomiting blood as he tried to keep talking.

—I should hate you... Why did I protect a Terran? And to make matters worse, a novice?

—Don't talk! —Esther tried to stop him, while the vampire smiled bitterly.

In any case, the girl wasn't sure of what to do either. When she lifted her head as if to find support from the priests, she found the eyes of one and the disturbed movement of the other.

—Where did I go wrong? Why did I have to...? —the Marquis whispered, lifting his gaze towards Esther, even though at that point he was unable to see anything. On his face there was no trace of pain. Even though he was pale, he seemed to be in peace.

—I wanted to see you happy, Maria... How did that turn into this...?

—Thank you, dear —said a voice surprisingly free of hatred.

Before realizing it, she had lifted the bloody face to hers to whisper:

—Thank you... Your work is done. Really, thank you...

—...

In the last moment, it seemed as if the Marquis smiled.

It was as if someone had slightly moved his lips, but that must have been because of Esther. The eyelids closed serenely on the grey eyes that were never to open again.

—Lord, that his soul finds peace somewhere.

Why was she crying? The warm tears that fell from her eyes wet her cheeks and the cheeks of the dead man. It was strange, but for the dead man, and only for him, Esther made the sign of the cross.

—That he meets the person he loves once more and that there is mercy for him... Amen.







## Epilogue

# THE EVENING OF HUNTERS

Because this blood will pollute the land: and the land  
will not be expiated by the blood that was shed on it  
but by the blood of the one that shed it.  
Numbers 35,33

Spring comes early to Southern Europe.  
This year it came especially early. It hadn't been even a week since the end of the carnivals and the cold had begun to fade. The fervent devotees from all over the world on pilgrimage to the holy city were enjoying the beautiful spring day by strolling around the square.

—Winter has ended—a beautiful woman dressed in a habit said admiringly with a sweet voice, as she observed from up high the pilgrims gathered in Saint Peter Square.

The office, elegantly decorated, was bathed in sunshine. Since she hadn't been in good health as of late, the woman seemed hopeful with the arrival of spring.

The Vatican was aflutter like a hornet's nest, busy managing the situation after the battle of Istavan. Caterina Sforza, Duchess of Milan, was no stranger to the task. After all, as Secretary of State of the Holy See; she was the one responsible for administrating all external affairs. She was extremely busy organizing the deployment of help to the refugees and with the diplomatic contact with the secular states that had been worried about the military action. That day was the first time in a long while that she could allow herself a breather.

—You can continue with the report.

With a slight cough, Caterina turned from the window and returned to her desk. Crossing her fingers under her pointy chin, she looked at the priest that was standing in front of the desk.

—According to your report, Lohengrin is a programmer, but how did everything end? We're you able to capture him?

—Negative—a petite priest answered in a monotone and without a second's hesitation, continued with his report.

—At this moment we don't know the whereabouts or the identity of the individual in question.

—I see.

Caterina's expression did not change at the words from her subordinate.

Up to a certain point, she was expecting that. If Dietrich was really like how Abel had described him in his report, then he would have left no identifiable traces.

However, looking at it from another perspective, considering that he had left no traces in such a huge operation like that had been, his intentions were not hard to imagine.

—*Igne natura renovatur integra...* Contra Mundi are still active, that's for sure.

Behind the monocle, eyes shined with the hardness of a blade.

If those individuals were involved, they would probably be unable to find anything no matter how long they continued the present investigation. They were extraordinarily cunning and cautious to the unthinkable. Caterina knew that very well, because she had had some encounters with them in the past.

—The human resources of AX are limited. I think that we've done all that we can in this investigation. Duchess of Milan, is it not possible to ask for help from other agencies?

—What are you trying to say, exactly?

The beautiful cardinal cocked her head at Tres' proposal.

The Vatican had fixed the Istavan issue by calling a common vampire threat. It was obvious that nobody had been yet able to explain what had driven the Marquis of Hungary to perpetrate such reckless attack and stepping all over centuries of peace. He was a vampire, the enemy of humanity. There was no reason for him to have human reasons. There was nobody in the Vatican stupid enough to try and explain something that had no explanation. There shouldn't be anyone...

—... There is only one person that is the exception to that rule.

Through Caterina's head crossed the image of an absent man.

He who, even as a priest, called them "people" was not in Rome at the time. He remained in the city, still in winter, finishing up with some of the problems derived from the disturbances of three months before.

—By the way, when is Father Nightroad coming back? —the most beautiful cardinal in the world asked her subordinate in the most carefree tone she could muster.

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The snow that had been falling since morning had begun to freeze as the day went by.

Politely cleaning the white pile that had accumulated on the tombstone, the girl placed a bouquet of winter roses she had made.

—Your Grace, I think I had already said this, but... I have finally decided to leave.

The image of the bishop engraved on the tombstone did not reply. Smiling sweetly in silence, she seemed to be listening intently to the words of the lonely girl kneeling before the tombstone.

The tombs lines up in that corner of the Cathedral's garden were all new. The tombstones were modest and were arranged in a simple manner, but in the snowy landscape floated the purity of the sacred land where nothing was going to come to disturb the peace of the dead. It had already been three months since all that but maybe because the memories were still vivid amongst the citizens; she was the only visitor in the cemetery.

—The city is recovering nicely and all the injured have been getting better. The new bishop has asked me to stay here, but the truth is, I want to go to Rome. Why did everyone have to die? I think that what I need to do now is try to understand that.

The girl held the rosary that hanging around her neck, tightly.

"Why was I unable to save my family?" Every time she thought that, she felt a heavy weight in her stomach, like if she had drank too much water. She still awoke in the middle of the night screaming.

But...

—Now I want to think on what I need to do. I think that is the best way to look after your memories.—the girl murmured softly, but with decisiveness, and she lifted her gaze to the beyond.

In a corner of the cemetery was a small tomb. There was nothing written on it, no dates, not even a name. Only the girl knew who was buried there, along with a portrait. If anybody from the Church found out about the identity of the deceased, her transfer to Rome would probably become a citation to appear before a religious court. Now everyone admired her for having lead the Partisans in battle, even though she was nothing more than a little girl, but those same voices would turn into shouts calling her a witch if they knew.

Of course, the girl didn't think she did anything wrong. However, she was not stupid enough not to know that in the world where she lived in that was the most serious of sins.

—First I need to know where you come from... Well, where both of you come from. Then I'll decide if I hate you or not.

After talking like that to the man that rested along with his wife, the girl stood up. She didn't have much time before the train left. She turned, picking up her simple suitcase with one hand, and started walking rhythmically.

The girl stopped along the row of cypresses.

She noticed a figure that bowed his head in order to get through the cemetery gates. As if he had also noticed her presence, the eyes behind the round glasses opened wide in surprise, the face hidden behind a bouquet of winter roses.

—You are leaving today?

—Yes... I'm heading to the station right now.

The girl remained silent after giving a short answer to the lanky priest.

The priest said no more. He acknowledged her briefly, and kept moving. The girl returned the acknowledgement and kept walking on the white snow. The priest saw her as she got in the car that waited for her at the cemetery gates and then kept heading towards the tombs.

Neither of them turned around.

Both of them knew that they would cross paths again.

In Rome...